Becoming a Bengali Woman: Exploring Identities in Bengali Women's Fiction, 1930-1955

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Ph.D Thesis

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July 2007

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I hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

History seldom tells the story of ordinary men far less ordinary women. This thesis explores the tales of ordinary middle class Hindu Bengali women and their different experiences of the period 1930-1955 through fiction written by women. To undermine the logic of colonialism the Indian nationalist movement had sought to project an image of a modern, progressive, egalitarian society while also holding on to its distinctive cultural identity. The fulfilment of these twin objectives hinged on Indian women. Consequently Bengali women found themselves negotiating different objectives that required them to be 'modern' as well as patient, self-sacrificing, pure and faithful like Sita. They were engaging with varied powerful images as they tried to construct their identity since there was no general consensus as to what the Bengali woman ought to be. In the spheres of female education, nationalist politics, women's work and the family and community the dominant sections tried to fashion women according to their ideology. The novels convey the contradictory prescriptions women experienced. In many cases women had radically different aspirations and they manipulated these prescriptions to carve identities that were at odds with the prescriptive mould. They resisted attempts at feminising education, participated directly in revolutionary activities instead of merely sympathising and took to waged work instead of becoming dependants. Yet they continued to see themselves as familial entities even when it was possible for them to establish their identities as individuals with education, political and legal rights and economic independence. The perimeter of the Bengali woman's identity was extended but her emotional landscape continued to treasure her roles as daughter, wife and mother. The radical potential that middle class Bengali women exhibited in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, with their political activism, and in the wake of the Bengal famine and the freedom and partition of the country, thus became subsumed under the image of the 'complete' woman who packed into her life many things including the duties of a daughter, wife and mother. The novels demonstrate considerable change in the dynamics of gender relationships, yet for many women the 'brave new world' remained a distant dream.

A Note on Bengali transliteration

In this thesis the system of transliteration followed uses 'o' as the inherent vowel instead of 'a' and except for *chondrobindu* (the nasalisation sign) no diacritics have been used. Thus, names of Bengali texts, names of characters in the novels, and the italicised Bengali words, phrases and sentences have 'o' as the inherent vowel. So, I have written *Nobankur* and 'Momota' even though the translation I use has it as *Nabankur* and 'Mamata'. In the case of authors, political activists, critics, organisations, where there is a commonly accepted English spelling, I have kept to it. Where I have not found any commonly accepted English spelling as these Bengali books are rarely known, I have spelled them according to the transliteration system given below. There are some words which are used in other North Indian languages as well and have an all-India currency, like *purdah.* I have kept to the conventional spelling when I am using such words in the pan-Indian context but have changed the spelling to approximate the Bengali tongue when I have used it in the context of Bengal. So when *Purdah* has been used with respect to Bengali women only, it has been written as *porda.* Similarly a character in *Nobankur* has been written as Odhir while charcters from the *Mahabharata* have been written as 'Arjuna' and 'Abhimanyu'.

See overleaf for transliteration chart.

ক	k	থ	th			অ	o
খ	kh	দ	d	শ	sh	আ	a
গ	g	ধ	dh	ষ	sh	ই	i
ঘ	gh	ন	n	স	s	ঈ	i
ঙ	ng			হ	h	উ	u
চ	ch	প	p			ঊ	u
ছ	chh	ফ	ph			ঋ	ri
জ	j	ব	b				
ঝ	jh	ভ	bh				
ঞ	ঁ	ম	m	ড়	r		
ট	t	য	y	ঢ়	rh	এ	e
ঠ	th	র	r			ঐ	oi
ড	d			য়	y		
ঢ	dh	ল	l	ঁ	~		
ণ	n			ং	ng	ও	o
ত	t			ঃ	h	ঔ	ou

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Acknowledgements

My deep gratitude-

to the Felix Trust that believed a research on Bengali women and their writings was worth pursuing and generously supported me to that end;

to the Central Research Fund of the University of London that made possible a fertile trip to India and Bangladesh in search of women's lives and words;

to SOAS for a fieldwork grant towards an India trip for the final 'exploration'.

to the Mary Trevelyan Fund for helping me with the expenses of the last stage of work.

To Dr.William Radice, who has been there all along with his support and guidance, ensuring I did not embark on an intellectual misadventure, while also preventing brain desiccation by keeping me abreast of film festivals, concerts, plays and other sundry delightful things, I can never thank you enough.

To Swati Ganguly, who listened to my dreams and encouraged me to dream some more as she nurtured me through my university years at the Department of English, Visva Bharati, India, I would not be here without you.

To Santa Bhattacharyya and Samantak Das, my heartfelt thanks for helping me to believe in myself.

To Sarmistha Duttagupta, who read my drafts and papers and pointed me in the right direction innumerable times during fieldwork, thank you so much.

To Kaiser Haq, Niaz Zaman, Firdous Azim and Nilofer Begum in Dhaka, Bangladesh, your warmth, help and boundless generosity is unforgettable. Thank you.

To my colleagues at Suri Vidyasagar College, who did everything they could to ensure that I could travel to London, I am very grateful.

I would also like to thank Moushumi Bhowmick and Samita Sen for patiently answering my queries and helping me to clarify my thoughts.

Heart-felt thanks to Hanna Thompson for answering all my queries and giving helpful suggestions to fix my troubled transliteration system.

Mulaika, May, Deboshruti and Foqia, my friends at SOAS and partners-in-crime, I am so thankful that you were there to share with me the nerve-wrecking experience of inflicting another thesis upon the world.

To Gayatri Chakrabarti and Suma, thank you for providing me a home-away-from-home in those early cold and homesick days.

My parents Kanai Lall and Chandana, for being with me even when I am without you, and cherishing my dreams enough to let me go, and my brother Abir, for all your affection, advice, help and setting up of impossible deadlines, this thesis is as much yours as it is mine.

To Andrew, quite simply, I could not have finished my writing without you. For being there, through rain and shine, my inadequate thank you.
Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.
"Pooh!" he whispered.
"Yes, Piglet?"
"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

A river is fed by many.

To my parents

Who started me off on my journey

Chapter 1: Introduction

Objective of thesis

To him that hath is given, they say.
There was a bird
That wanted so to fly.
It looked and looked, but could not find its wings.

It saw the others soar,
Catching the gold from the sun.
Others winged and circled past.
Joyful, dipping in the wide blue.
This little one that could not fly
Wept so bitterly.
'Tell me where I get my wings?'
The others laughed and flew away
Didn't you know, you little fool.
Wings come to those who fly.

(Maithreyi Krishna Raj, *Wings Come To Those Who Fly* in Leela Gulati and Jasodhara Bagchi (eds) *A Space of Her Own: Personal Narratives of Twelve Women*)

Jyotirmoyi Devi called her novel on the Bengal partition, *Itihasey Striporbo* (The Woman Chapter in History), when it was first published in the periodical *Prabasi.* This was later changed to *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* on the suggestion of the publisher. Jyotirmoyi writes in the author's note, the 'woman chapter' is difficult to write and Vedvyas could not really write one successfully when he attempted to write the *Stri Parva* in the *Mahabharata.* She suggests that this *parva* runs on in contemporary times. In her palimpsestic reading of history woman's story is the subterranean tale that remains untold when all has been written about the glorious deeds of kings and heroes of war. Her note suggests that she is trying to write a fragment of this untold story of womankind in her novel, bringing to the fore those unheroic deeds that women have experienced, their abuse and humiliation and the aftermath. This conscious engaging with history is embedded in the narrative of all the novels being read in this thesis, Jyotirmoyi Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga,* Ashapurna Devi's trilogy *Prothom Protishruti, Subornolota, Bokul Kotha*, Sabitri Roy's four novels *Trisrota, Sworolipi, Paka Dhaner Gan, Meghna*

Podma and Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur.* Yet this is a history of a different kind, which is often perceived as a mere female story, petty and of no significance. As Virginia Woolf thoughtfully remarked, who determines what stories are significant enough to be told?[1] How is it decided that certain events are important and some are not? The selected novels, with their 'different' stories, focus on the late colonial and early post colonial period and the political movements of the time figure centrally in the narratives either by their explicit presence or careful absence. The reading of this period has been engendered in the novels of these female authors primarily through the 'becoming' of the female characters in this politically fertile epoch. The thesis examines the 'becoming' of Bengali Hindu women as represented in the novels during a span of twenty-five years, 1930-1955. It attempts to unravel the politics of identity that women experienced and negotiated, a process where there were three factors at work: the necessities arising out of the political and social compulsions of the time that were outside and beyond the control of the patriarchal system, the patriarchal attempts at 'construction' and crucially, women's consenting to and countering of the forces of redefinition and also expressing their own ideas about their identities. Hence, this is a process that I prefer to describe as 'becoming', rather than 'making' or 'constructing' or even 'recasting'. This thesis attempts to locate the agency of women in their 'becoming' even when they are most severely disadvantaged by the patriarchal system, trying to fashion their identities and those of other women, regardless of the success of these attempts.

While there are a considerable number of novels written by Bengali women in the twentieth century, my selection of novels has been guided by number of factors. Firstly it was important to locate texts that were concerned with the late colonial and early post-colonial period, portraying the social dynamics in

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[1]Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (London: Chatto and Windus; The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp.68-69. Here Virginia Woolf is talking with regard to literature. She writes, 'Yet it is masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of values persists.'

the final years of the struggle for political independence as also the life of the people in the nascent nation state. Secondly the novels selected needed to explore the lives of Bengali women closely, through narration and characterisation. Thus a novel like Jyotirmoyi Devi's *Boishakher Niruddesh Megh* could not be included even though the novel is based during the independence struggle. The novel focuses primarily on the male protagonist and his self-discovery and the women that he interacts with are peripheral and seen through his consciousness. The third factor was the availability of books. A brilliant rendering of the refugee experience in a novel such as Sabitri Roy's *Bodwip* could not be used because the text is not available in academic or public libraries and could not be recovered even from personal collections.[2] At this moment there are efforts to publish the various writings of Sabitri Roy as also Sulekha Sanyal, which have been out of print and circulation for decades and for this research it has been difficult to find the original Bengali copies of their novels. There have been other women authors in Bengali literature, who have been contemporaries of the four authors read here but they have either written romances or social novels that lack a strong historical consciousness. Male authors like Sotinath Bhaduri and Tarashonkor have written quite powerful realistic novels firmly embedded in the historical matrix, but their female characters tend to be peripheral in the narrative. Female authors like Protibha Basu, on the other hand have written quite vivid and powerful short stories on this period as also on other subjects but my study required long narratives focusing on the development of character and plot over a larger time scale. Consequently Jyotirmoyi Devi's novel on partition, Ashapurna Devi's *Subornolota*, some of the novels from Sabitri Roy's corpus of works and Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur* appeared to be the most appropriate texts to work with.

Above all these are realistic novels, as opposed to romances. They bring to the fore this period of political and social turmoil in Bengal with the three broad political movements intensifying their efforts, the Congress and other

[2] There is copy with Roy's daughter Gargi Chakravartty in Delhi but she was away when I was in Delhi and while we spoke on the phone, I could not meet her and photocopy *Bodwip*, which was not available in the personal collections I examined in Kolkata.

allied groups, the communists and the revolutionary groups, the Second World War, as well as the famine of 1943 and the partition of Bengal in 1947. Given these material factors that were transforming the public sphere, what impact did that have on the personal sphere and the lives of women in Bengal? I would argue that the novels effectively represent the social changes, that are sometimes quite radical and at other times slow and subtle, through the 'becoming' of the various female characters. In her work on realism in Indian fiction Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies that one of the strands in Indian novel writing is that which 'renders contemporary Indian society realistically in fiction, joining the European novelists 'in that effort, that willed tendency of art to approximate reality' (Harry Levine, *The Gates of Horn* (New York, 1963), p.3).[3] Mukherjee contends that there is always the contentious matter of 'historical truth in the artistic reflection of reality', which was the concern of Georg Lukács in his work on the historical novel.[4] She cites an essay that Rabindranath Tagore wrote in 1898. Tagore challenged Freeman and Palgrave's comment that 'those who want to know about the age of the Crusades should on no account read *Ivanhoe'*, that the historical novel is the enemy of history as well as of fiction. Tagore argues that historical fiction is not about cataloguing facts but evokes an atmosphere that creates a consciousness of the magnificent rhythm of the chariot of time (*Rabindra Rochonaboli*, XIII, p.477). Georg Lukács puts it in another way. He posits that the historical novel is not about 'the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives that led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.'[5] While I do not intend to categorise these novels as 'historical novels', they do partake of some of the characteristics of the historical novels in their powerful evocation of the period and the historical processes, delineating what Lukács calls 'a rich and graded interaction between different levels of response' to these processes.[6] M.H Abrams defines the historical novel as a form that 'takes its setting and some

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[3] Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (Delhi: OUP, 1985), p.5.
[4] *Ibid*, p.57.
[5] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p.42.
[6] *Ibid*, p.44.

characters and events from history', and also makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the narrative.'[7] These novels work both ways, in portraying the influence of the historical events and issues on the lives of the protagonists as also the obduracy of the social structure that resists the influence of historical events and consequent change. Ashapurna Devi and Sabitri Roy work on epic scale in their respective novels to portray the historical process in all its complexity as manifest in the public and private spheres. To borrow the words of Lukacs, these novels 'demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such way', particularly as experienced by middle class Bengali Hindu women. Hence I consider these novels to be particularly relevant source material for exploring the politics of identity that Bengali middle class women experienced in the period 1930-1955.

In their work on the partition of Bengal, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta write how important it is to consider the creative literature along with memoirs, oral and written. They write, 'transcription of reality and literary imagination form one indivisible structure of experience. Both memoirs and fiction together articulate the totality of experience by combining the creative and confessional modes of expression.'[8] Novels have been chosen here in order to examine this 'creative expression' with some references to life writings. It has been taken into account that the representation of Hindu Bengali society of this period is mediated through the historicity of the author and the time in which the particular novel was written and the character of the genre itself. Thus, the social representation in the novels has not been perceived to be akin to 'photographic' documentation, but each novel is a historical product and these novels do definitely attempt to read this historical period. As Keith Thomas reiterates in his Ernest Hughes Memorial Lecture on 'History and Literature', fictional works offer an interpretation of the past that

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[7] M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999, 7th ed.), p. 192.

[8] Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003), p. 10.

needs to be taken into account.[9] This thesis engages with the 'interpretation' that the novels undertake. Thomas further says, 'I have no doubt, in short, that we should regard works of imaginative literature as potential historical sources, just as much as any other source. Of course, such writings present tricky problems of interpretation but so does all historical evidence.'[10] The authors of the works being read in this thesis were to a large extent extremely self-conscious with a sharp awareness of the material historical substratum on which they were basing their narratives. Three of the authors, Jyotirmoyi Devi, Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal were closely connected to the public sphere through their political beliefs and work, while Ashapurna Devi talks about how her writing has not attempted to transcend what is the lived reality for her. As a housewife in a middle class Hindu household, she has closely observed the sphere of the home and the interpersonal relationships that operate within this sphere. She says that in her work she has tried to portray what she has observed, what is rather than what ought to be.[11] Jyotirmoyi Devi, an active Gandhian along with her daughter Ashoka saw at close quarters how communal violence left an indelible impact on the lives of women caught up in it, while Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal were closely connected to the growing communist movement. Their ideologies and personal background certainly informs the perspective of the narrative while at the same time making these works important historical documents. Thus, this thesis regards these novels as rich source material for any reading of women's history of late colonial and early post colonial Bengal.

Here it must be reiterated that often gender studies rely on what are regarded as 'unconventional' materials, in the absence of or due to the inadequacy of conventional materials. Detailed representation of society, for this thesis, could have been accessed from largely two sources, women's autobiographies and their fictional writings. While I have used some autobiographies, I have chosen to use novels as my primary source material

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[9] Keith Thomas, 'History and Literature', *The Ernest Hughes Memorial Lecture* (Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1988). Here Thomas elaborates on 'the value of literature to history, and the literary nature of historical work.'

[10] *Ibid*, p.8.

[11] Ashapurna Devi, *Ar Ek Ashapurna: A Collection of Essays and Reminiscences of Sm. Ashapurna Devi* (Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1997), pp. 13-17.

because novels employ a large canvas offering a broad social overview while bringing to the fore minute details about multiple lives. The novels chosen for this work portray with sensitive details the rural and urban milieu. So it is possible to examine the lives of characters living in villages and tribal areas, in towns like Chittagong and in a metropolis like Calcutta, as their trajectories intersect and they interact with each other. Raymond Williams makes the point, 'the realist novel needs, obviously, a genuine community: a community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship – work or friendship or family – but many interlocking kinds.'[12] These novels often portray complex and dynamic communities that are more mobile than before, breaking and continually reforming due to political events and change in their relation to production. Quite crucially this also leads to reformulation of the status and relationship that men and women have with each other within the family and society. The novels also allow a close glimpse into the lives of many women coming from across the social strata. There are characters belonging to wealthy landowning families, decaying feudal families, the emerging middle class urban family where the men work in educational institutions, offices and hospitals to earn their livelihood. There are women who come from nationalistic families and themselves become political activists, while there are others who belong to agricultural families moving to cities in the wake of the famine. Then there are others from ordinary middle class educated families whose lives are severely disrupted by partition and the resultant loss of living, home and homeland. What is interesting about using large novels with numerous characters for my study is the multiplicity of social images that come through. The polyphonic nature of the source disrupts any attempts at a homogenous social narrative. Autobiographies, while they afford a close examination of one life and a limited social milieu, do not always offer a perspective on larger social patterns and changes. Also, published autobiographies are usually by women who lived exceptional lives or belonged to the elite sections of society. Thus these documents are illustrative of a small section of society that was highly educated, interested in 'reforms' and with more liberal notions of gender roles. Also, the few autobiographies

[12] Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel' in David Lodge (ed.), *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1972), p.589.

from the twentieth century that I am acquainted with are remarkably reticent about exposing the mental agitations, thought processes and personal emotions, choosing to focus almost exclusively on the events in the lives of the authors and their work in the public sphere. The selections and the omissions are in themselves quite interesting and give rise to lots of queries. However, for the purpose of this work, these omissions are limiting, making fictional writings more promising source materials.

Identities and 'Becoming'

The identity of the Hindu middle class woman during this period of the twentieth century was in a state of flux, as it had been in the late nineteenth century. The twentieth century is interesting from this perspective because while in the nineteenth century a very small section of Bengali women from progressive families, usually Brahmo, were exposed to the reformative ideas and legislations, in the twentieth century the effect of these reformations and the various debates about the status of women in the family had percolated down to reach many ordinary Hindu women across the spectrum of the middle class. By this time the first generation of educated and professional women had given birth to and raised the next generation and the social resistance to reforming practices like that of child marriages, spreading of female education, relaxed segregation of the sexes, had been gradually eroding. As we see in Malavika Karlekar's *Voices from Within*, when mothers like Lilabati Mitra, daughter of social reformer Raj Narayan Basu, could not complete their education due to early marriage they were keen to ensure that their daughters had a better chance.[13] The educated daughters, when married, took with them their education and the liberal ideas of their mothers and families and tried to establish these in their marital families. At the same time there was also a lot of anxiety about the impact of education, political participation and work in the family and society and how they would transform women. This anxiety was not limited to the patriarchy but was also palpable amongst women themselves as they contemplated what new roles they might play. As the autobiographies of two well known political activists Santisudha Ghosh and

[13] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: OUP, 1993), p. 1.

Manikuntala Sen depict, there was a dissatisfaction with living a life like their mothers, limited to familial roles, yet they were not quite sure what they could do with their lives.[14] Neither Santisudha nor Manikuntala came from politically active families, though Santisudha's siblings joined the revolutionary groups later on, and they forged their way through after some amount of groping as they lacked role models in their immediate surroundings. Santisudha also writes an interesting novel in 1938 called *Golokdhãdha,* which evocatively portrays how some women struggled with their identities as they tried to manipulate their own 'becoming'. Shanta, the protagonist, appreciates the opportunity her guardian gives her to educate herself but resists his attempts to slot her into a familial role, even when she is not certain about what she is and what she would like to be.[15] Santisudha powerfully portrays the agony of the uncertainty involved in the 'becoming' process.

Identity is not the product of a sole individual consciousness. The term 'identity' has been used in this thesis in two ways. Identity in one sense is understood to be who or what a person is, from his or her perspective. It is also a social perspective of who or what a person is and the person is labelled accordingly. This understanding is however far from simple and human beings often negotiate amidst a sense of multiple identities to eventually form a sense of a composite identity that is frequently unstable, mutable and dynamic. Understanding of the concept of identity partakes both of philosophy and politics, among others, and here the concern is more political than philosophical. In a very general conceptualising of the problem, we can posit that there is an individual's idea of the Self and there is the Other's idea of the Self, where each plays off against the other to address the problem of self-definition. And this is where the problem of essentialising also arises, as the Self tries to essentialise the Other and vice versa, in a political manoeuvre where the Other is attributed some 'essential' characteristics. We can term this, after Duns Scotus and his followers like Gerald Manley Hopkins, the *haecceitas* or 'thisness' of an entity where every thing in nature is said to

[14] See Santisudha Ghosh, *Jiboner Rongomonche* (Calcutta: Jayasri Prakasan, 1989) and Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Calcutta: Stree, 2001).
[15] Santisudha Ghosh, *Golokdhãdha* (Calcutta: Gurudas Chattopadhyay & Sons, 1938).

possess some essential characteristics which make it what it is. The problem for feminist politics is that while individuation and individuality is important as it provides space for the will to act and for the play of agency, delineating essential attributes or outlining the 'thisness' of a woman can be used to circumscribe or trap a woman in a self-image. This negates the possibility of change and a woman becomes or tries to become the image the Other creates for her. This is the politics of identity which in effect is a relentless process of manipulating the Other's sense of his or her self towards the end of ensuring or preserving the hegemony of an individual or group. Thus in this thesis, identity has been used to refer to an individual's sense of self, while the politics of identity refers to manoeuvres to manipulate the creation of self identity.

Identity or the perception of a self emerges from pre-determined factors like membership of a kinship group, caste, race and religious group and class as well as from the roles one plays throughout one's life. In Bengali Hindu society, the pre-determined factors, which are the group memberships, tend to determine the roles that one would play and particularly for women their subjectivity is compromised by their group membership. This is the politics of identity that this thesis seeks to analyse, together with how women negotiate the prescriptions of the group and patriarchy. Powerful group identities tend to set up codes within which women are supposed to operate and in societies where the collectivity has primacy over the individual, the pressure to conform is quite strong. Patriarchy works within and through these group identities framing the parameters of masculinity and femininity. In turn, practices that exhibit the masculinity and femininity of group members also function to give the group itself a distinctive identity. In a sinister manner, nationalist and communalist politics frame the politics of identity for both men and women but in different ways, where the identity of the racial/ethnic and religious group is deemed to be inscribed in the living practices and bodies of the group members. For both men and women, assertion of their individuality is perceived as a challenge to undermine the group or collectivity. In the case of Bengali women, the femaleness of their identity is continually emphasised. It was quite common to refer to a woman as *meyemanush* (a female being).

Some one like Ashapurna Devi's Subornolota resented being labelled thus, which seemed to signify a creature that is less than *manush* (human). The label carried with it all the connotations of femininity, attributes and codes of behaviour, and women like Subornolota feel that the label caged them and made the transcendence of their state of degradation impossible. There was no easy resolution of the vexing matter of the status and position of women in the private and social, economic and political organ of the nation state. The fictional writings studied in this thesis form a corpus of narratives that offer a distinct and different perspective of the dialectic between the various stakeholders involved in 'fashioning' the 'modern' Bengali woman and the emergent nation.

Primary Resources

Women had proved themselves to be quite prolific writers from the later half of the nineteenth century itself and in the twentieth century quite a few women wrote and published novels. For the thesis I have chosen to read some of the novels written by four women: Jyotirmoyi Devi (b. 1894), Ashapurna Devi (b. 1909), Sabitri Roy (b. 1918) and Sulekha Sanyal (b. 1928). Apart from Sulekha Sanyal who died quite young from leukaemia, the others were prolific writers with many novels and short stories to their credit. Except for Ashapurna Devi, the other authors were not 'popular' writers and it was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that they were resurrected to an extent, in the wake of renewed interest in women's writings amongst people in academia. What is interesting about the four authors is the power of their narrative voices, though their writing styles are very different. The novels have been chosen on the basis of the strong social and political consciousness that they reveal. In her day Sabitri Roy was sidelined by the communist party because her novels were perceived to be too critical of the workings of the party. Sulekha Sanyal, on the other hand, was regarded as too 'feminist' to be popular. Jyotirmoyi Devi's writing, which has been termed 'cerebral' by Mahasweta Devi, is more stark and at the same time quite subtle in its treatment of the humiliation of women in Hindu society. Politically Jyotirmoyi Devi, Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal were idealists even if there ideologies were different. Their idealism definitely impinges on their work but the novels

were not written for political reasons. Their fictional works are not didactic, despite the strong ideological underpinning.

Jyotirmoyi Devi's writing career started at the age of twenty-eight after she was widowed at twenty-six. For Jyotirmoyi Devi, her writing was part of an effort to transform her life into something positive and affirmative. She experienced widowhood as a negation, that suddenly defined her identity in terms of 'not wife', and then when she returns to her parents' home, she realises she is also 'not daughter'.[16] Scholarly engagement and then her creative outpouring allowed Jyotirmoyi Devi to communicate with a community of people beyond her loneliness and grief. Significant portions of her corpus of fictional writings are based on Rajasthan where Jyotirmoyi was brought up in her grandfather's house. Jyotirmoyi is quite explicitly a feminist writer and and the deprivations and abuses that mark a woman's life from the moment of her birth is quite vividly portrayed in her work. Jyotirmoyi was also a Gandhian activist but she is aware of the limitations of the political movements and what it can offer women. Her personal idealism and beliefs do not cloud her stark vision of what it is to be a woman in India in the twentieth century, even in post colonial India. Her writings were published in the periodicals of the day and, as she writes in her memoir, many of her feminist prose writings drew lots of critical comments from her readers. Even though Jyotirmoyi was a prolific writer she was not a popular writer and for almost three decades she had been forgotten. Then a collected volume of her writings edited by Subir Roy Choudhury and Abhijit Sen was published in 1991. Subsequently Jyotirmoyi was 'rediscovered' as an author largely due to the resurgence of 'Women's Studies' and the consequent recovering of forgotten authors and translation of the Bengali originals into English and other languages. For one acutely aware of the discriminations, humiliations and abuses that structure a girl's life from her infancy, Jyotirmoyi's writing continually exposes the socially sanctioned oppression and marginalisation of women. *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* definitely has a readership in mind as the book is quite simply dedicated to all women of all ages who have been violated, molested and

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[16] Jyotirmoyi Devi, *Smriti Bismritir Torongo* (Calcutta: Nirmal Book Agency, 1986).

humiliated. Yet it is a slim volume where the unmentionable and concealed female experience of the Indian partition is represented sensitively, without rhetoric or embellishment, allowing the story of Sutara's life to communicate with the reader without much intrusion of the authorial judgement. Jyotirmoyi Devi's creative writings were both about finding and expressing herself as a woman and representing women's experience.

Ashapurna Devi, on the other hand, was a popular author and continues to be canonised and read closely in mainstream literature courses. She started writing as a small girl in periodicals and was fortunate enough to be encouraged by editors and publishers. Her trilogy was very enthusiastically received and she won awards. The three volumes have gone into several reprints and though Ashapurna Devi had been a home-bound housewife in her personal life, in West Bengal her fame as an author is widespread. If we examine the genesis of Ashapurna as an author, she did not begin writing for ideological or commercial purpose. She started writing as a young girl for children in children's periodicals. With encouragement from the publishers she graduated into writing for adults and *Prem O Proyojon* was her first novel written for an adult readership.[17] Mohammad Nasiruddin, the editor of the well known periodical *Sougat* had to get Ashapurna Devi to the studio to get her photographed as he wanted to publish the photographs of the authors who wrote for the women's edition of *Sougat*.[18] In her autobiographical writings, Ashapurna expresses, like Jyotirmoyi, her awareness of the discriminations and deprivations that shape the life of a Bengali girl. She was denied formal education and she had to educate herself in the letters. Hence her writing was perhaps in some way proving her worth as a woman, as it was a creative expression. Ashapurna herself has said that she wanted to write about the lives of women like herself, whose life and struggles have eluded public memory but who have nevertheless broken new grounds in small but significant ways for the future generations. Ashapurna's readers have ranged from across the spectrum, but perhaps she had wanted to write most of all, as

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[17] See Ashapurna Devi, *Ar Ek Ashapurna: A Collection of Essays and Reminiscences of Sm. Ashapurna Devi* (Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1997).

[18] In a personal reminiscence by his daughter and editor of the women's periodical begun by M. Nasiruddin *Begum*, Nurjehan Begum.

Subornolota says in *Subornolota*, to all those Subornolotas out there, whose lives have been despised and forgotten as 'mute and inglorious'.

Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal both believed in the communist ideology and Sulekha Sanyal was a member of the communist party but neither of them set out to write socialist literature. Their ideology comes through in their work but they did not write didactic short stories and novels for the communist party. It is not possible to say with absolute conviction what the party desired them to write but it is interesting that in her novel *Sworolipi*, Roy 's protagonist is an author who is accused by the party of not writing 'proletarian' literature. He is expelled from the party and one of the reasons given is that his work reeks of a bourgeoisie mindset.[19] Neither Roy nor Sanyal became popular authors and Roy's works were scarcely reprinted. *Trisrota* was reprinted 11 years after first publication in 1950 and *Sworolipi* was reprinted 40 years after first publication in 1992. Only *Paka Dhaner Gan* had some measure of popularity and was translated into other languages apart from being published in a three part single volume in 1986, almost 30 years after the third part of the novel was published in 1958. As Tanika Sarkar writes in her foreword to the translation of *Paka Dhaner Gan*, Roy's was a lonely creative impulse and she wrote despite the neglect of her work by the readers, the party and the publishers.[20] Roy as a litterateur was definitely sidelined by the communist party after she wrote the critical *Sworolipi*, which the party asked her to withdraw. Roy did not write such a critical work again but her works clearly depict an intellect and a consciousness that refused to be straitjacketed into an unquestioning acceptance of an ideology and practice.. Sanyal wrote *Nobankur* and another novel *Dewal Podmo* that was published posthumously. In her lifetime one volume of short stories *Sindure Megh* was also published. She wrote numerous short stories that were published in periodicals like *Parichay*, which was a communist publication. Some of these writings have been lost while some others were collected by Sanyal's sister Sujata and an anthology

[19] Sabitri Roy, *Sworolipi* (Calcutta: Ratna Prakasan, 1992), p. 75.
[20] Tanika Sarkar, 'Foreword', *Harvest Song*, trans. Chandrima Bhattacharya and Adrita Mukherjee (Kolkata: Stree, 2005), p.xi.

published by Aruna Prakasani in 2000.[21] Sanyal was considered to be too political and feminist for acceptance among a wide readership base in the 1950s. Even now it is easier to come across the English translation of *Nobankur* by Gouranga P. Chattopadhyay (Stree, 2001) than the original Bengali. Sanyal started writing as a teenager and her writings are deeply introspective, exploring the human spirit as it grapples with the harsh social and economic conditions, and sometimes managing to find dignity and love in the most dehumanising conditions.

Though the stories are quite different, what brings the novels together is the period on which they focus. When viewed as a collection the novels illuminate the myriad facets of the 1930 -1955 period, providing a nuanced perspective on tumultuous events. A great deal of work has been done on the political history of the period, as also on the famine, the *Tebhaga* and Bengal partition but what has not sufficiently been researched is the 'Her Story' of the period, women's perspective on the time and their lives as they lived through the Gandhian movements, the high-noon of revolutionary activities, the world war accompanied by the devastating famine, *Tebhaga Andolon* and the trauma of partition. As the novels are firmly situated in socio-historical matrix of this period, they effectively engender the period from the viewpoint of middle class Bengali Hindu women. Another reason for reading these novels is the extended spectrum of society that have been portrayed, from school master to feudal landlord's family in rural Bengal to teachers and nurses and deputy magistrate's family in Kolkata. These novels give 'a local habitation and a name' to countless Bengali women who would otherwise have been wiped off completely from the nation's memory. The schoolteacher's daughter in a nondescript Bengal village who is married at the age of fourteen but nurses dreams of education and doing things with her life cannot be found anywhere except in fiction (Deboki in Sabitri Ray's *Paka Dhaner Gan*), where the authors have represented many such ordinary women who were extraordinary in their courage and ability to struggle. In the case of Sabitri Roy's novels, Tanika Sarkar says, 'she was the first and perhaps the only novelist in Bengal

[21] Sujata Sanyal (Chattopadhyay) (ed.), *Sulekha Sanyaler Golpo Songroho* (Kolkata: Aruna Prakasani, 2000).

to describe communist households and ways of living in both urban and rural milieus, to point at something like a communist everyday aesthetic and cultural practice.'[22] About the range of Sabitri Roy's novelistic world, Sarkar writes in her foreword to an abridged translation of Roy's novel *Paka Dhaner Gan*, of her 'writing on epic proportions, about a vast world of difficult people going through difficult times, refusing to see any of them as less than people.'[23] Another reason for working with this selection of novels is the divergent areas of experience that they illustrate. Each novel is concerned with different sections of contemporary society. So while *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* moves across from an educated school master's family in rural Noakhali to the conservative household of a retired District magistrate in Kolkata to the college accommodation of a single lecturer in Delhi, *Subornolota* focuses on a large traditional joint middle class family, that still prides itself on segregation of women and ritual purity in the kitchen. Sabitri Roy's novels criss-cross between rural east Bengal and Kolkata dealing with myriad families belonging to various strata of society, and Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur* primarily concentrates on a decaying feudal family in rural East Bengal.

Also, novels by virtue of being 'fictitious' enable the authors to represent aspects of personal life that could not be represented in auto/biographical documents, letters, journals, reports, etc. For example the trauma of partition that many Bengali women experienced on their bodies that were perceived by the men from the two communities as enemy space is too gruesome to recount except in fiction. Similarly the marital rape that many women experience repeatedly in their daily lives cannot be represented except in fiction. An analogy can be found in Shakespearean plays, for example, that commented on contemporary England by transposing it onto a fictitious Venice or on ancient Rome. Fiction enables us to talk about an uncomfortable, unsavoury reality that is projected onto an imaginary 'created' world, which we can look upon in the safe knowledge that it is not 'real'. In genteel Bengali society it was difficult to talk about personal life and for these

[22] Tanika Sarkar, p. viii.
[23] *Ibid*, p. xi.

women authors the only way that the personal could be brought into the public sphere for debate and discussion was by representing it in fiction.

These novels also provide an invaluable record of subjects like the entrance into the public workplace by Bengali middle class women, of which very little documentation exists. While it is possible to find accounts of the professional lives of a personage like Kadambini Ganguly, it would not be easy to come across one of a woman clerk doing a nine to five job in a city office or a nurse working shifts in a tuberculosis hospital. Another aspect that suggested that working with novels would be rewarding was the paucity of materials regarding women's emotional lives in other sort of writings like autobiographies. Bengali women have always been reluctant to bring to the public forum their emotional lives. So while we have a few autobiographies from this period, they focus primarily on the political and professional life of the author. The personal life is quite selectively presented. It is possible to find in the novels a more detailed presentation of the emotional lives of women.

Novels like any other document are also limited in their selection; the novelist selects a locale, an age, and certain characters to weave a narrative, filtering out everything else. The characters in these texts have a varied background but similar to the authors themselves most of the women we read about are middle class women. There are a few instances when we come across women from other classes like the tribal women in *Paka Dhaner Gan*, the poor women from the sharecropper's families in *Trisrota* or the weaver woman Prosadi'r Ma in *Meghna Podma*. Yet these are rare instances. By and large the novels are about middle class women. Consequently, in my analysis, when I use the general term woman/women, I refer to middle class Hindu Bengali women. This is the limitation that my primary texts impose. As the authors probably best knew the lives of middle class Hindu women, in their writings they portray that section of the Bengali female population. Hence there are a large section of women whose lives do not come within the purview of my studies. Particularly glaring is the omission of Muslim women from these texts. There are a few references scattered with the most sustained one occurring in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* where Jyotirmoyee Devi

brings in portraiture of a Muslim family that rescues the orphaned girl Sutara after the riots. However there is no sustained depiction or analysis of Bengali Muslim society. While this is unfortunate, it is also reflective of the near complete divide between the two communities. With the Hindu obsession with the *mlechchho* (untouchable person but not referring to lower caste people) who had to be kept apart from the unsullied cooking space and the body, the interaction between the communities would be quite superficial at the best of times. Hence it is possible that it was quite difficult for the authors to gain an insight into the lives of Muslim women. So Muslim women are almost completely unrepresented, reflecting a social reality that bore the seeds of another fatal division that manifested itself during partition.[24]

Reasons for selecting subject of study

The novels represent both the political ferment of the twenty-five years with its radical social implications as well as the stasis, resistance to changes of large sections of society in Bengal. The political outcome of these years is well known and documented. What is not equally well known or understood are the gender dimensions of the political movements and the social changes that they might have engineered. The 'woman question' in the context of nineteenth century Bengal has been well researched, unravelling the complex social motivations and reformative acts that tried to construct a 'modern', genteel Bengali woman, the *bhodromohila.* The twentieth century has not been considered so significant for probing into the issue of politics of identity in the absence of reformative rhetoric and highly publicised and controversial reform acts. A large number of research initiatives undertaken in the 1990s on the late colonial period have focused primarily on the gender dimensions of partition, such as those by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, Joya Chatterji, Gargi Chakravartty among others. Scholars like Sunil Sen and Peter Custers have also done some work on the communist party and the *Tebhaga Andolon.* An important work on the twentieth century *bhodromohila*

[24] There are many fictional works by authors in Bangladesh featuring Muslim women. However I have not come across any that focuses on the independence struggle of 1947. In the psyche of the people of Bangladesh the struggle for language, *Bhasha Andolon,* leading to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 is of foremost importance. Even when someone like Selina Hossain has written about the 1930-1947 period, in her novels like *Kãtatare Projapoti* and *Bhalobasa Pritilota*, the protagonists have been Hindu women.

is by Dagmer Engels, *Beyond Purdah?*, which covers the period 1890 to 1930 and focuses on a small subsection of the large and growing middle class. In all these works what one does not find is a close study of the middle class woman, with or without any involvement in contemporary politics, yet whose lives were becoming increasingly politicised even within the private sphere of the home that was no longer impervious to the happenings in the world outside. There is a distinct lack of scholarship on the issue of the identity of women that has so preoccupied researchers on nineteenth century Bengal and the 'renaissance'. There seems to be the perception that after the high profile and in many cases unsuccessful campaigns for improving the status of women in the nineteenth century, which was in a large measure responsible for the creation of the *bhodromohila*, society had settled down into an even keel with regard to the fashioning of the 'modern' Bengali woman. Certainly the twentieth century lacks reformers of a comparable status and there were no similarly highly visible reform movements, but on the other hand there were numerous acts relating to women that were tabled in parliament and discussed in various committees throughout the country that would have significant impact on the lives of women. From historical accounts of the work women were doing, as part of the nascent women's movement and otherwise, it can be reasonably concluded that a fair amount of work was being done to improve the conditions of women, which could potentially create a larger impact than the *sotidaho* ban. What is even more significant is the initiative women were taking to bring issues to the public forum for debates, building up a public opinion and exerting pressure on parliament to re-frame laws. All this along with the renewed vigour of the political movements and other factors like war and famine contributed to the politics of identity and the process of 'becoming' of the middle class Bengali Hindu woman. Thus, the thesis regards this as an important area of enquiry hitherto not explored. The thesis bases itself on the premise that the politics of identity as experienced by Bengali women in the late colonial and early post colonial period should be examined in terms of its nature, the players, the objectives and the degree of impact on the lives of women and in society.

The two years framing the chronological boundary of the study are at one level convenient cut-off points rather than definite limits. On the other hand they mark off with a certain amount of precision the entire length of the period that the various novels cover and the two years in themselves are quite significant for women's history. *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* begins with the Noakhali riots and then progresses well into the 1950s as Sutara educates herself and then starts working as a lecturer, while Ashapurna Devi's trilogy encapsulates the late nineteenth century and continues well past the mid-twentieth century as Bokul watches her nieces grow up. The novel that I have focused on in this thesis, *Subornolota,* portrays a few decades of the early twentieth century through the life of Subornolota, enthused by the zeal of the revolutionaries, observing from a distance the *chorkha* frenzy and marches and picketing and then the waning of the popular mood in the later half of the 1940s. Sabitri Ray's novels, which she started writing from the late 1940s, portray the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, as the heroic revolutionaries were caught, went to prison and were sent as detenues to remote rural areas, where they gradually aligned themselves with communist ideology, or went over to Subhash Bose's group. Then came partition, and as the state and people in West Bengal grappled with the influx of refugees the political activists found a new objective in working towards refugee rehabilitation. Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur* covers the 30s and 40s as Chhobi grows up in Kusumpur village and then she leaves with Sukumari to go and study in town. When she comes back to Kusumpur in the midst of famine after the town has been evacuated due to bombing it is probably late in 1944. Hence all the novels being used in this study are spread over large parts of the 30s and 40s and some part of the 50s, making it imperative that the historical period that the thesis focuses on covers these three decades.

1930 has been chosen as the starting-off point as it was in this year that Gandhi began his Civil Disobedience movement. In the context of Bengal, 1905 was quite important with the Curzon instituted partition of the Bengal province and the beginning of the *Swodeshi andolon.* However, even though the *Swodeshi andolon* captured the popular imagination and women participated in a day of *orondhon*, giving up glass bangles and wearing

swodeshi clothes, much of it was limited to practices within the home and the nature of political activities that women could participate in was quite limited. While there were few women like Sarala Devi at this time, women who were able to participate in the public sphere were very few in number, and within their homebound roles there was little that they could do for the *andolon.* Another milestone was the Gandhian non-cooperation movement of the early twenties that was remarkable in the way Hindus and Muslims got together to work for the freedom of the country. However, the call to women to participate in the cause of the nation came in a powerful way with the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, which in its simplicity appealed and made it possible for many people, not only women to participate. The writings and interviews of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay describe how the non-political, uninitiated women came out for the first time to participate in the Salt Satyagraha.[25] The Gandhian image and charisma coupled with the non-violent and simple operative style of the satyagraha mode of political agitation made it easier for a generation of middle class women to participate in the defining political movements of their time without jeopardising their traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers. Thus it seems that from the perspective of women's history, 1930 was an important year that made possible mass participation of women in political movements. Even later on, probably the largest number of women participants was to be found in the Gandhian movements even when the communist movement was gaining in popularity in Bengal especially among educated urban women. The communist movement demanded much more from its workers and many women as also men found it quite difficult to become whole-time workers at the cost of the welfare of their families. The years 1954, 55 and 56 are important for women's history in another aspect. In these years the first parliament of independent India debated and passed the Hindu Code Bill that had first been brought into the legislature almost two decades earlier. In fact Jawaharlal Nehru was unable to get through the bill in the first parliament and after a few years could only manage to get the provisions of the bill passed separately due to the strong opposition of the members of the Congress to amendments being made in the case of divorce

[25] Private Papers of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Oral History Transcript, NMML, New Delhi.

and property rights.[26] This was a landmark bill for Hindu women as it enabled them basic rights in the spirit of equality in the new nation state, countering Hindu orthodoxy and the patriarchy that sought to prohibit women from laying claim to property and dissolution of cruel, abusive or incompatible marriages. In 1955 the two main provisions of the bill regarding divorce and property rights, the Hindu Marriage Act and Hindu Succession Act were passed. As in the case of earlier legislations to improve the condition of women, we realise that legislations do not necessarily spur social change and dramatically improve the lives of women. Nevertheless the fact that legal measures became available for women to fight discrimination within the family and society is a milestone in the annals of the movements for gender equality.

The politics of identity is played out in the various spheres of experience. In this thesis I have chosen to examine the spheres of education, political participation, women's work and the family and society. This categorisation occurs in the works of Meredith Borthwick, Dagmer Engels and Geraldine Forbes, in addition to the other categories they use like childbirth and marriages, women's movements and so on. My rationale for using these categories here cuts both ways. They suggest that these are the four primary areas that liberal western feminist models for women's emancipation concentrate on. Any gender sensitive development model would also look at female education, their political consciousness and rights, their ability to access economic resources and lastly their condition within the family. Hence it seems to be quite logical to adopt and adapt such a model for this work. Female education continued to be a central concern for those working for the improvement of women's lives in early twentieth century India. The statistics were abysmal even as the numbers of students gradually increased amidst inadequately funded and furnished schools and ongoing debate about nature

[26] What eventually became the Hindu Code Bill was first introduced in the assembly between 1937 and 1938. See Jana Matson Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1979), pp. 141-189 and Geraldine Forbes' 'The Indian Women's Movement: A Struggle for Women's Right or National Liberation?' (pp.71-77) in Gail Minault (ed.) *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1981). Also Lotika Sarkar 'Jawaharlal Nehru and the Hindu Code Bill' in B.R. Nanda (ed.) *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity* (London: Sangam Books Limited, 1990).

and extent of female education. There is no denying that education can be empowering, and this is often felt in the reverse. In other words while an educated person might be able or unable to empower himself or herself, it is definitely the case that an uneducated person struggles in the fight for rights unaided by knowledge or even basic literacy. Hence it is vital to start off with female education and see what it achieved and did not achieve with regard to the 'becoming' of Hindu middle class Bengali women. Similarly politics is central to this exploration of women's identities because political participation is a tool to access power and demand rights. This was a period when there was a surge of political activity with groups professing different ideologies with their different aims encouraging women to join as sympathisers and workers. So the lives of many women were touched by this political zest, be it simply as observers or as active participants. The obvious question then arises: what did the fact of simply being in the midst of frantic political activity do to women's sense of their self? How did it impact on their lives and crucially, were women able to remedy their perennial marginalisation from power? I have adapted this concern with political activism in that this thesis will not simply examine the awareness and participation of women in the public sphere of political struggle but also examine how this political consciousness informs other aspects of their lives, particularly their private lives.

Another indicator of women's condition is their ability to access economic resources. It is perceived that if women were able to take up waged work, their financial independence would greatly improve their lives, as they would not have to put up with dependency and the abuse that might come along with it. While wages are certainly important, I extend the notion of work in this thesis to analyse the impact of both remunerative and non-remunerative work. It is my position that women spend a lot of time and labour in doing work, which is not remunerative. What is the 'value' of this work that often cannot merely be assessed in economic terms? How does this work, as separate from waged work, inform women's self-perception, self-satisfaction, self-esteem and their identity, even though the motivations and reasons for taking up this work may differ from woman to woman? Lastly I address the sphere of the family and society that is pivotal to the lives of most women, defining their

primary familial roles. This is also the sphere that is most resistant to changes, as it is the dominant factor in the process of 'becoming' a woman. So any discussion of the politics of identity must analyse the family and the kith and kin network that first informs a girl's sense of her identity. It goes without saying that the first element in the formation of a girl's identity is an understanding of her girlhood that is continually imparted to her as she grows up. With the political turbulence and the social devastation caused by the famine and then partition, how did the families change, if at all, and what impact did it have on the politics of identity that girls/women encountered at home and in society? Did the primary familial roles change with the changing times and economy, i.e. the gradual breakdown of the feudal system? How did families perceive 'modern' women and how did their economic, class and rural/urban location influence this perception? As the novels closely depict the private sphere of the home with its kith and kin network, I think it would be fruitful to analyse this private area of experience in the lives of the female characters and explore how the various femininities was being constructed. This thesis will also attempt to problematise this liberal feminist model for women's development and emancipation. It will try to assess through the portrayal of women and society in the novels, what the authors reckon was the degree of change that female education, political participation and waged work actually did bring about. How effective is this model for emancipation and empowerment? How empowered do the women in the novels feel when they have had education, access to the political arena and remunerative work? Thus, the reason for choosing these analytical categories is two-fold: they are four of the key areas where any change that occurs will have an impact on the lives of women and their sense of self. Through this study we will examine the ideas, debates and subsequent changes that were taking place in these spheres unravelling the politics of identity and how middle class Bengali women negotiated these self-defining forces. The other reason is to render these categories itself problematic and critically evaluate how justified it is to regard access to education, political machinery and economic resources as markers of women's empowerment.

Relevance of literary texts as primary material

It is *de rigueur* to use historical documents to read literary texts. It is less usual to use literature for an exploration of history. The critic Richard Wilson posits that literary texts are 'imbricated in specific material contexts such as buildings, regions, customs, professions and laws.'[27] Both New Historicists and the Cultural Materialists situate a text as a social and cultural construct, which must be understood through the culture and society that produced it. Stephen Greenblatt says, 'the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class or creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.'[28] The potential of this position is quite radical for feminist criticism and adds to the materials that can be used for feminist historiography. For the feminist, if a text is a social and cultural product, it becomes possible to query what the text says about the 'repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society'. In this context it is particularly relevant to remember what Paul Hamilton says about Raymond Williams and his 'efforts to demonstrate that history is not literature's background but an extension of the same plane of action on which literature makes sense.'[29] In other words, the reading of a text must indicate to a degree the historical matrix that enabled its 'making' just as history enables us to 'read' literature.

Hans Bertens writes, 'the literary text, then, is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social and economic dispensation. Far from being untouched by the historical moment of its creation, the literary text is directly involved in history.'[30] In fact in some cases, a literary text is more representative of the social history of a period rather than a scholarly work on the same. I would like to refer to literary works on partition in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi by authors such as Sadat Hasan Manto, Krishna Sobti, Amrita Pritam among others and the corpus of Bengali works on the famine of 1943. The thesis assumes a position whereby the product is taken to be indicative of the substratum, though not a mirror reflection of the substratum. A novel is not

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[27] Cited in Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p.141.
[28] Cited in Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 176.
[29] Cited in Paul Hamilton, p.141.
[30] *Ibid*, pp. 176-177.

newspaper report or a journal article, though these can be ingredients for a novel, and there are peculiarities involved in its writing - the author's imagination and subjectivity and a process of selection among others - but it is not divorced from or indeed devoid of the historical particulars. The authorial persona definitely influences the subject of the texts and its representation. Gandhian inclusiveness, tolerance and social reconstruction are quite vividly present in Jyotirmoyi Devi's novel, as is the communist ideology in both Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal's novels. In Sabitri Roy's case her troublesome relationship with the communist party is also quite evident. Again the worlds that Sotyoboti, Subornolota and Bokul inhabit are structured by Ashapurna's perceptions and ideology, and her historical subjectivity. One common feature of all the authors is that they wrote about a time that they themselves had experienced and all the novels were written at the same or quite soon after the time they have portrayed in their work. Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal started writing in the late forties and early fifties while the works of Ashapurna Devi and Jyotirmoyi Devi were written in the sixties. In fact Jyotirmoyi Devi's Sutara would be a young woman in her mid or late thirties at the time that Jyotirmoyi is writing about her. What I am trying to arrive at is that the historical period that the novels portray and the period in which they were written are quite close and the novelists themselves were products of the time that they portray. This provides the immediacy of a lived experience with the disadvantage of lacking a perspective that a distance in time generates. In the four chapters I will briefly draw the historical context with regard to education, women's political participation, work and the family and in that context I will place those novels that are most relevant for analysis. In my conclusion to the thesis, I shall attempt to draw out the general observations and ideas that the novels present regarding each of the core issues and what that suggests about the politics of identity that middle class Bengali women encountered during this period. At the outset this thesis contends that the these novels, more than any other genre of documents, throw a light on the development of the ordinary Hindu middle class Bengali woman during two and half decades of political and social turbulence, which is crucial to our understanding of the 'becoming' of the 'modern' Bengali woman.

Nineteenth century background

The story of Bengali women took an interesting turn in the nineteenth century. It came as a century of possibilities for Brahmo and Hindu women. There was the effect, as Cooper and Stoler have described, of the two-way encounter of different cultures[31] as well as the colonial critique of the status of Indian women, famously articulated by James Mill. There was also the perception of the intelligentsia that society was beset with many maladies that needed to be addressed. In her book *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women learned when Men gave them advice*, Judith E. Walsh uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* to understand the interaction between competing systems.[32] I find it quite useful as well to understand the exchange that happened between the English and the Indian Hindus. Walsh quotes Bourdieu: 'Every established order tends to produce ... the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness'. She then explains, 'Within enclosed and self-referential (traditional) systems, the natural and social world appear self-evident (*doxa*) and their principles of operation remain largely invisible. Only when disrupted by a competing system - such as, Bourdieu suggests, class conflict or imperial and colonial dominations - does what is "undiscussed" and "undisputed" break apart into the opposing fields of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Then, although the orthodox attempts to restore the earlier unconscious and unarguable state of *doxa*, in fact, it exists only with reference to and in argumentation with the alternatives made apparent in "heterodoxy".' In such a state every aspect of life becomes a contesting site.[33] In the Indian context there were the contradictory pulls that the nascent nationalist movement exhibited as an effect of the colonial onslaught. There were attempts at reinterpreting history and cultural practices, while simultaneously engaging in reforms and in 'modernising'. The impact of the reluctant dialogue with the colonial cultures is evident in the fractured nature of the nineteenth century reformative acts and debates. The *Brahmo*

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[31] See Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds) *Tensions of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). They write, 'Europe's colonies were never empty spaces to be made over in Europe's image or fashioned in its interests; nor, indeed, were European states self-contained entities that at one point projected themselves overseas. Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself.'

[32] Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women learned when Men gave them advice* (Lanham, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), p. 7, 13.

[33] *Ibid,* pp. 13-14.

Somaj split because of such differences and the positions of the two most well-known and early reformers, Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar were considerably different as Rammohan advocated the ban on *Sotidaho* while advising a life of ritual purity for the widow, while Vidyasagar fought hard for widow remarriage. The colonial encounter had exposed the Bengali people to different cultures and knowledge systems, inspiring some changes, both obvious and subtle. So while there were lot of debates and vehement opposition to reform measures like the banning of *Sotidaho*, introduction of widow-remarriage, the start of female education, the more subtle changes are evident in the letters that women wrote to newspapers and periodicals, in the clothes they started wearing, in their increased mobility, the breaking of the taboo of impure communal space while travelling on railways and in their participation in the *Bongo-Bhongo Andolon* by maintaining a day of *orondhon* (no cooking).

One of the earliest nineteenth century debates regarding the condition of Hindu women that was championed by Raja Rammohun Roy was about banning of *Sotidaho.* In 1829 William Bentinck passed a law to the effect and some attempts were made to enforce the law. Two decades later, in 1849 one of the first secular Native Female School was set up in Kolkata by J. E. D. Bethune with the support of people like Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, Ramgopal Ghosh, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Madan Mohan Tarkalankar. More than three decades after its establishment, in 1883, this school which was now known as Bethune College gave Bengal the first female graduates of the British empire, Kadambini Basu and Chandramukhi Basu. However, much before the emergence of the first female graduates, Rassundori Devi, a rural housewife from a conservative Hindu family had already published what is now regarded to be the first autobiography in Bengali (the first part of the book was published in 1868). In a society where female literacy was frowned on and considered to bring on widowhood, Rassundori calls herself *Jitakshora* (someone who has mastered the letters by herself). The autobiography, *Amar Jibon* narrates the fascinating story of how this woman learnt the letters with the aid of only a religious text *Choitonyo Bhagbot* and her son's handwriting

practice scripts.[34] The enthusiasm with which women in the nineteenth century Bengal took to writing can be gauged from Malavika Karlekar's estimate that about 400 writings by Bengali women were published between 1856 and 1910. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay lists the scores of periodicals that women started during this period.[35] Also at this time, Vidyasagar, one of the steadfast supporters of education, particularly female education, was campaigning for widow remarriage, which became a law in 1856. The nineteenth century also spawned many debates about child marriages and the Age of Consent. In 1860 the Age of Consent stood at 10 years for girls, which was increased to 12 years in 1891 after much acrimonious debate. A tragic and gruesome incident which puts in perspective this entire debate was the death of Phulmoni, a 10-year-old girl who was raped to death by her 35-year-old husband Hari Mohan Maiti. Less spectacular but equally divisive were the ongoing debates about female education, segregation and women's clothing.

The nineteenth century also paved the way for women to participate in nationalist politics. In the Fifth Indian National Congress session, six women participated as delegates among whom were Swornokumari Devi and Kadambini Ganguly from Bengal. In 1890 Kadambini Ganguly became the first woman to speak at the Congress when she was called on to move a vote of thanks to the Chairman. Kadambini Ganguly also obtained the distinction of becoming the first female doctor in Bengal when she graduated from the Calcutta Medical College in 1886. Another facet of the nineteenth century history that is important for Bengali women's history was the impact of the *Brahmo Somaj.* Although the *sonaton* (traditional) Hinduism closed its doors on Brahmoism as a religious denomination, the *Brahmo Somaj* itself had a slow, subtle but sure impact on the Hindu *somaj.* As the Hindus and Brahmos lived side-by-side and intermingled, with many Hindus converting to Brahmoism or being deeply influenced by it, it was not possible to keep them apart in watertight compartments. Hindus did try to segregate and ostracise

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[34] See Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban, A Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).

[35] Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, 'Samoikpotro-Sompadone Bongomohila', *Visva Bharati Patrika*, Sravan-Aswin, 1357.

the Brahmos, but as families fragmented with some members embracing Brahmo tenets, strict segregation could not function. In her memoirs of her childhood days *Chhelebelar Dinguli* (first pub. 1958), Punyalata Chakravarty, one of the daughters of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury and the sister of Sukumar Ray, writes how three of the five sons of her grandparents (of which her father was one) embraced Brahmoism as did one of her youngest aunt.[36] As Brahmos, even with all their factions, embraced the notion of female education, relaxed the practice of segregation of women in the *ondormohol* as well as in public places like the place of worship and made it possible for women to engage with literature and other forms of expression and entertainment like music and dance, Hindu society also started losing some of its rigidity, and many taboos were no longer strictly enforced.

As has been suggested in the brief sketch of nineteenth century Bengal above, there were many attempts at reforming different aspects of life, almost all of which relates to the 'women's question'. What is also apparent that while this reform made it possible for women like Kadambini Ganguly, Abola Basu, Kamini Roy to emerge, these women were the exception rather than the rule. The lives of the majority of Hindu women were not touched by the reforms. Later assessments have concluded the widow-remarriage act failed and there were no convictions under the Age of Consent act, effectively rendering it null and void. Female education also faced much resistance and numbers of female pupils continued to be quite low. In the public workplace, women encountered resistance, discrimination, abuse and physical violence, as detailed in the autobiography of one of the early female doctors, Haimabati Sen[37] and evident in the labelling of Kadambini Ganguly as a prostitute by a

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[36]Punyalata Chakravarty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd., 1997), pp.116-122. It is difficult to trace the impact of Brahmoism on Hinduism. It is an interesting area of enquiry about which information can be gleaned from memoirs and auto/biographies among others. For example people from my parents' generation have remarked how some of their teachers, who were regarded as being 'modern' and 'progressive', were *Brahmobhabaponno* (influenced by Brahmoism) if not actually Brahmo converts. Also see Lila Majumdar's memoirs *Pakdondi* (1986) and *Ar Konokhane* (1967). She was Punyalata's cousin.

[37] Geraldine Forbes and Tapan Raychaudhuri (eds), *The Memoirs of Dr. Haimabati Sen: From Child Widow to Lady Doctor*, trans. Tapan Raychaudhuri (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2000).

popular Bengali periodical.[38] However, Haimabati as also Rassundori were among those enterprising and resourceful women who managed to forge their way out of inhibiting circumstances without almost any institutional support. This raises the interesting question of the relationship of reformative ventures and women's collaboration/participation and agency. In other words, apart from their victim status, what were the roles women played in the reform measures? What were the issues that women were concerned with most and wanted to be addressed? Did the reforms take into account women's concerns? Why did many of the reformative acts fail to be instrumental in improving the condition of women? How did women negotiate the fractured nature of the politics of identity? The female identity was a much-contested site that resembled a veritable minefield for the women. The various autobiographical documents that have come down from nineteenth century Bengali Hindu women testify to the contradictions that women encountered in their personal lives, which was sometimes passed down to the next generation of women. For the twentieth century these questions are extremely important as they have a bearing on the politics of identity that women encountered in twentieth century Bengal. Many of the concerns remained the same, reforms and legislation, women's participation and agency and how to translate reformative ideas into the social matrix. The twentieth century would be struck by similar failures and contradictions, with the addition that women's identities and bodies also became the sites of communal violence.

Introducing the period: 1930-1955

The 'Her Story' of this period largely focuses on the emergence of the Indian women's movement through the setting up of women's organisations, their active participation in nationalist politics and attempts to ensure women's representation in electoral politics and their contribution to the movements for social and economic justice in the wake of the Bengal famine, the *Tebhaga Andolon* and partition. These three areas of focus encompass the attempts

[38] Chitra Deb, *Mohila Daktar: Bhin Groher Basinda* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1994), pp. 98-99. The editor of *Bongonibasi* Maheshchandra Pal took a pot-shot at the progressiveness of the Brahmos by naming Kadambini as a prostitute. Kadambini's husband Dwarakanath brought a defamation case against the periodical and won the case. The editor was sentenced to a six-month prison sentence and fined one hundred rupees.

Indian women made to address issues relating to women in terms of campaigning and legislation, for greater access to the political power structure and make heard and address the issues of those oppressed, discriminated against, neglected and marginalised by the state and other institutions. In other words, women turned their gaze on the self, engaging in genteel lobbying and persuasion and then turned beyond adopting a radical and militant stance.

i) **Women's organisations and lobbying for legislations**

In 1910, realising the need for women to have a separate platform for discussing issues of interest, Sarala Devi Choudhurani established the first women's organisation called the Bharat Stree Mahamandal. By the late 1920s the urge to organise women to create a platform where women could meet to discuss pressing issues and develop pressure groups that would petition the colonial government and negotiate with the political parties to push forward reform measures, had led to the formation of three main women's organisations between 1917 and 1927: the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). These organisations did not have any political affiliation and steered clear of nationalist politics. They kept themselves to issues pertaining to women and collaborated with both the government and the political parties to address these issues. However, soon the situation changed as many women who were members of these organisations also became members of political parties: women like Sarojini Naidu, Renuka Roy, Begum Shah Nawaz, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and so on.

The AIWC in its 1928 Conference decided that unless harmful social customs were eradicated there could be little meaningful progress in the sphere of female education. So it broadened its scope of concern and redefined its profile as an organisation for mobilising public opinion on social welfare issues. In 1930 when the civil disobedience movement started the AIWC retained its apolitical stance. Over the years its scope of action widened. While it began with education, it added social customs that restricted education like child marriage and *purdah*, labour, rural reconstruction,

indigenous industries, textbook, opium, and the Sarda Act. Its resolutions covered the range from advocating film censorship to widespread instruction in birth control. The AIWC programme included those that were specifically directed at removing women's disabilities and others that concerned the entire nation like the Gandhian reconstruction and social action programmes. However its claim to speak for all Indian women increasingly became fraught with difficulty. The Muslim women resented a comprehensive legal bill for all women, as they did not want the Shariat to be tampered with, creating a communal division among the AIWC members. Also many women from the lower rungs of society could not become members, as the membership fee was too high for them.

One of the high profile issues that the organisations like the AIWC fought over was the child marriage reform bill that is better known as the Sarda Bill. Various bills were introduced and defeated over the years till Sahib Harbilas Sarda introduced his Hindu Child Marriage Bill in 1927. The situation at this time had become critical with the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* with its scathing attack on Indians and Indian customs, particularly focusing on child brides 'raped' by their older husbands. After a lot of debate the minimum age of marriage for females was set at fourteen and eighteen for males and the age of consent was not mentioned. The Act came into effect in April 1930. The women's organisations worked hard to get this legislation passed. They led propaganda against child marriage, petitioned and met with the Joshi Committee and after its passage worked for registration of births and marriages and other legislations to make it a meaningful Act. Consequently there was a lot of rejoicing after the Act was passed. However soon the realisation dawned that this was a dead letter act as there was no administrative will to enforce the Act. Nevertheless the organisations matured with time and experience and in the 1940s as the country was preparing for freedom they participated in almost every major committee or planning group to discuss India's future. They worked to assuage the suffering of people during crises like the Bengal famine and continued to work for a new civil code that would recognise women's rights.

Women's Rights activists also had to fight long and hard for women's franchise as well. The attitude of the nationalists was that a franchise campaign was only a waste of energy that would be better spent 'helping their men against a common foe'.[39] However women continued their fight and Bombay and Madras were the first provinces to extend the franchise to women in 1921. Women next demanded the right to be elected to the legislatures and again after a long argument all the provinces granted women this right. V. Kamalabai Ammal wrote a petition to the Governor General protesting against the delay in removing sex disqualification from the statutes of Bihar and Orissa. She reminded him that women were 'as much children of India as males.' To even allow the legislatures to vote on this issue 'implies the monopoly of the male sex not only to enjoy the privilege but to confer [it] upon others – women – as a matter of charity.'[40] In 1927 Muthulakshmi Reddy was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council as the first woman legislator.

The appointment of the Simon Commission began the second round fight for female franchise. When the Congress decided to boycott the First Round Table Conference, the WIA had to withdraw as well in a gesture of support for the nationalist agenda, even though it had earlier decided to send delegates. The two women who attended independently recognised that universal adult franchise was the ideal but were willing to compromise in favour of special; reservations as an interim measure. However organised women in India disagreed and issued a memorandum in support of universal adult franchise. The Lothian Committee set up after the Second RTC rejected adult franchise but agreed that more women should be enfranchised and recommended increasing the ratio of female to male voters from 1:20 to 1:5. Just as women were disappointed with the communal award announced later they were also disappointed with the Poona Pact of September 1932 that effectively jettisoned universal adult franchise. In early 1933 women leaders decided to work for a franchise ratio of 1:5. During the last stages of preparing the India Act the Linlithgow Committee came up with different programs to increase the

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[39] M.K. Gandhi, "Women and the Vote," *Young India* (November 24, 1920), p. 2.
[40] Government of India, Home Dept., file no. 212/1929 in Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (New York, Melbourne, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 102-103.

number of women voters to bring the ratio at 1:5. Many Indian women activists felt betrayed by their allies. Forbes hits the nail on the head when she says the British wanted to manage the women's issues without challenging the status quo while the nationalists agreed to compromises without consulting the women's organisations.[41]

In 1934 the AIWC asked the government to appoint an All India Commission to consider the legal disabilities of women, specifically examining the issues of inheritance, marriage and the guardianship of children. The appeal arose from the Renuka Roy authored pamphlet *Legal Disabilities of Indian Women: A Plea for a Commission of Enquiry.* Roy was the legal secretary of the AIWC. Between 1937 and 1938 a series of bills pertaining to Hindu women and the Muslim Women's Right to Divorce Bill were introduced. In the provincial legislatures anti-dowry bills, marriage laws, and bills to allow women to inherit were introduced. As India's visibility in international organisations increased, reformers in the legislatures were concerned with India's image in the League of Nations and International Labour Organisation. However male opposition to even moderate reforms remained strong and the bills introduced were all defeated one by one. The strong masculinist bias evident in the debates shocked the women leaders who were now led to couch their pleas in terms of human rights.

The government agreed to set up a committee of eminent lawyers to study Hindu law and make recommendations. In 1941 Sir B.N. Rau was appointed Chair to the committee but no woman was included in the committee. The women's organisation cooperated with each other and worked hard to gather information for the Rau Committee, distributing the questionnaires to their branches and asking the local leaders to return them as quickly as possible. The final Rau Committee report was a blend of two views of Hindu society. As Geraldine Forbes says, 'This document nationalised the women's rights movement, claiming that it would be possible to combine the best elements from the ancient Hindu texts with legal principles suitable for contemporary

[41] Geraldine H. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 112.

society. In short the committee was offering to rationalise Hindu law without claiming an intention to modernise Hindu society.'[42] The report was published in 1946 but was not considered till the Dominion Parliament came into being.

Even in the Constituent Assembly the Bill ran into rough weather due to the steadfast opposition of the male members, the inconsistent stance of the Indian National Congress and adverse views of Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Nehru promised the women activists that he would get the provisions of the bill passed through during the term of the first parliament. Finally the provisions of the Hindu Code Bill were passed through parliament in the shape of five acts between 1954 and 1956. Jana Matson Everett gives the five acts and dates of passage. They were 1) Special Marriage Act (1954) which concerned Civil marriage applicable to all Indians; 2) Hindu Marriage Act (1955) which legalised inter caste marriage, monogamy and divorce; 3) Hindu Succession act (1955); 4) Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956); and 5) Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956) that made it possible to adopt daughters.[43]

ii) **Women in the political movements**

Women were also increasingly participating in political movements. A significantly large number of women participated in the civil disobedience movement, which was a significant change from the earlier movements. Though Gandhi refused to take women on his march, they gathered to hear him speak and on one occasion the police estimated that there were 10,000 women in the crowd. Gandhi's genius was that without tampering with the image of 'essential' femininity, he transformed their passivity and suffering as virtues that made women the best soldiers in a non-violent *satyagraha*. In Calcutta, the *Mahila Rashtriya Sangha* founded by Latika Ghosh in 1928, was the first formal organisation to mobilise women for political work. The MRS was quite radical in its ideology but in its mobilisation strategy it used the paradigm of women as *Shakti* incarnate. They became quite visible during the

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[42] Geraldine Forbes, p.119.

[43] Jana Matson Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1979), pp. 187-188.

Congress held in Calcutta in 1928 when uniformed women volunteers marched alongside the men in the procession to inaugurate the Congress meeting. The volunteers were students from Bethune College and Victoria Institution as well as teachers from Calcutta Corporation Schools. Calcutta women also formed the *Nari Satyagraha Samiti* in 1929 in response to the Congress call for women to be ready to serve the nation. Urmila Devi was the President while Jyotirmoyee Ganguli was the Vice President. There was a core group of fifteen to twenty members who were ready to picket and court arrest. There was also the association of students formed by Kalyani and Bina Das, Surama Mitra and Kamala Dasgupta called *Chhatri Sangha* that met to discuss the political situation.

A remarkable feature of the resurgent revolutionary movement in 1931-32 in Bengal was the participation of young women in direct action. There were school-going teenagers like Santi Das and Suniti Chaudhuri, and young college and university graduates like Bina Das, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta. These women refused to limit themselves to the role of aiding and abetting by way of keeping house, hiding and transporting weapons and so on, and were determined about participating in the actions of the group. District Magistrate Stevens of Tippera was murdered by the schoolgirls Santi Das and Suniti Chaudhuri on December 14, 1931 as he made to sign the petition they had presented. In February 1932 Bina Das became a household name as she attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal at the Convocation ceremony of Calcutta University. In September of the same year Pritilata Waddedar, a Chittagong schoolteacher became the first woman martyr when she led fifteen men in a raid on the Chittagong Club. In her last testament she wrote: 'If sisters can stand side by side with the brothers in a Satyagraha movement, why are they not so entitled in a revolutionary movement?' By 1933 about 40 women revolutionaries were in prison and by 1934 the civil disobedience movement was over. As Geraldine Forbes has noted, women's participation in the civil disobedience movement legitimised the Indian National Congress. It succeeded in wresting the moral authority and returning it to the unarmed, non-violent Indian masses. It also won women a claim to participate in the governance in the nation. They won respect for their courage

and hard work and social benefits also followed. For the revolutionary women, it was a difficult call because even though they were valorised, society was distinctly uncomfortable with their 'unfeminine' role-playing. Rabindranath in *Char Odhyay* (Four Chapters) portrays the use of the revolutionary heroine Ela's sexuality to recruit young men. In *Ghore Baire*, Bimola's revolutionary sympathy is shown to be fallacious and is partly responsible for her wavering from a position of unqualified respect and allegiance to her husband. In the late 30s many of the revolutionary women were released and some of them joined the Congress.

In 1937 there were elections in accordance with the 1935 India Act where six million women were eligible to vote and to stand for election to general seats or seats reserved for women only. The Congress was reluctant to back aspiring women candidates. As the Congress transformed into a mature political party it clearly preferred propertied men while women found it difficult to finance campaigns. Even Nehru and Gandhi who were enthusiastic supporters of women's activism appeared to be lukewarm in their support of women's stake to political office. Women like Ammu Swaminathan and Muthulakshmi Reddy among others protested that the Congress overlooked capable women as electoral candidates. The Congress Working Committee was another issue where women reproached Gandhi and Nehru for not including any women. Nehru, to add insult to injury, told the women that they had a duty to help the men in the struggle for freedom but the issue of their emancipation was their own. They would have to force the men to grant their wishes. Women were nominated for the reserved seats but in the general seats men were preferred. Congress was not the only offending political organisation, as the percentage of women candidates never exceeded the percentage of seats reserved for women. Women held only 56 of the approximately 1,500 of the seats in all the provincial legislatures. Additionally 30 women were elected to the central Assembly. Some of these women were also placed in positions of power and authority. However electoral politics remained firmly male dominated.

In the Quit India movement of 1942, a direct call was given to women to join the movement 'as disciplined soldiers of Indian freedom'.[44] Women participated in the initial strikes and demonstrations in the cities, were among the radical students who organised peasant movements and when protest was suppressed, joined the underground movement. Usha Mehta was one such, who set up a clandestine radio transmitter in Bombay as the Government was blacking out news of the rebellion. She continued broadcasting till she was arrested in November. Aruna Asaf Ali became a leader of the underground movement and was forced to remain in hiding till 1946. Along with other leaders like the Socialists J.P. Narayan, Rammanohar Lohia and Achyut Patwardhan, Aruna decided to go underground to try to coordinate and channel the anger of undisciplined mobs. Gandhi was critical of Aruna though he did not denounce her. Sucheta Kripalani was another Congress worker who went underground when the Congress leaders were arrested in 1942. She established contact with groups still active throughout India and encouraged them to continue non-violent activity. When the movement spread to the countryside large numbers of peasant women joined the men in protesting against taxes, land tenure and landholder's rights. In Midnapur district one seventy-three year old widow went with others on a march to the town with the intent of capturing the court and the police station. When the marchers hesitated in front of the soldiers guarding the court, Matangini Hazra stepped forward lifted the Congress flag and gave her first and last public speech. She urged the crowd forward in the name of Gandhiji and was shot dead.

iii) Movements for social and economic justice

During the Bengal Famine of 1942-43 women became visible as both victims and activists. There were starving women who moved to the cities from rural areas with sickly looking children begging from door to door for leftovers and rice gruel, while others flocked to the red-light districts, doubling the number of women in Calcutta's brothels. Middle class women came forward to provide relief and the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* (MARS) organised and led women's

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[44] Aruna Asaf Ali, *The Resurgence*, p. 136, cited in Geraldine Forbes, p. 204.

demonstrations calling on the government to take action. On 17 March 1943 MARS organised a procession of 5000 women from Calcutta and its suburbs who marched to the Legislative Assembly protesting against rising prices and demanding food. Hunger marches by women followed in Bankura, Pabna, Madaripur, Badarganj, Dinajpur, and Chittagong. MARS activists also worked in the rural areas setting up relief kitchens and milk booths for the starving men, women and children. Relief work during the famine attracted a lot of women who had belonged to the revolutionary movement. Kalyani Das toured the famine stricken areas and set up 200 medical relief centres run by women. The AIWC also set up food kitchens in Bankura District, which fed 10,000 people daily, and established relief centres in Bhola, Rajbari, Tamluk, Comilla and Mymensingh Districts.

Women were also ready to work with the leadership and the men when the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (a peasant group) called for a mass struggle among sharecroppers to keep two-thirds (*tebhaga*) of the harvest in September 1946. At first women played a subsidiary role, helping with harvesting the crops, cooking food for the leaders, acting as lookouts, and sounding the alarm to alert their colleagues to danger. Gradually as police repression became more brutal and the Communist party, unprepared for armed struggle, withdrew from active leadership, women formed their own militia, the *naribahini.* There were some women who had worked with MARS activists like Manikuntala Sen during the famine and later became successful organisers during *Tebhaga.* Bimala Majhi was a child widow who had worked with Manikuntala Sen in 1943 to encourage destitute women to form self-help committees.[45] These women's committees obtained paddy, on trust from landlords, husked, sold it, and kept the profits after repaying the landlord. During *Tebhaga* Bimala was sent to Nandigram by the Communist party to recruit women for the movement. As the police arrested the leaders Bimala assumed more and more responsibility. It was she who made the decision and led peasants to destroy the threshing floors of the *jotedars* (rich peasants) and sell the landlord's share of the harvest. She was finally caught and

[45] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Kolkata: Stree, 2001), pp. 92-93.

imprisoned for two and a half years. According to Peter Custers, as the Communist leadership withdrew, and in a sense failed to lead and take the movement forward, women leaders emerged and the movement assumed the form of a militant and spontaneous uprising.[46]

Women also played an important role in the post partition period in the rehabilitation of refugees. About 8 million people were displaced during partition. Many women (the estimates run from 80,000 to 150,000) were abducted during this time. Pakistan and India agreed that these women must be 'recovered' and 'restored' to their families. About 30,000 women were recovered by 1957, the last year the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949 was renewed. For many who had reconciled themselves to their new 'families' the recovery was a renewed abduction where they were once again taken from their surrounding to an alien camp. For women who lost home and belongings and family members, it was a struggle to keep themselves and their families. In Bengal the refugee women went out into the streets to find work and fought the police and the henchmen of the absentee landlords to protect the homes that they had constructed on forcibly occupied lands. As the state reduced the fund allocated for refugee rehabilitation, as seen in the papers of Renuka Ray,[47] the minister for refugee rehabilitation, women were forced to work in the public sphere and participate in political actions. This was a generation of women who found that they had to engage with the sphere of political activism and fight for their rights, to ensure their own survival and the survival of their families.

Literature review

In the last twenty years some seminal work has been done on Bengali women that has done much to engender the social and political history of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal. Extensive use of women's writings has been made, most of then autobiographical, along with official papers of women who occupied political or other organisational office. Oral narratives, structural

[46] Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising: Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946-47)* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987), pp.52-60.
[47] Private Papers of Renuka Ray, Oral History Transcript, NMML, New Delhi.

interviews form another large corpus of materials that have been used for these studies. However women's fictional writings have not been deemed appropriate material for historical enquiry. Meredith Borthwick writes, 'the fertile field of literary works by and for women should be analysed in order to extend our understanding of their consciousness and inner life.'[48] Somehow feminists have overlooked this rich source of social documentation when exploring the gender history of the Bengali people. Consequently, no attention has been paid to the fairly substantial amount of female imaginative literature that emerges out of nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. It seems almost inconceivable that this popular art form, particularly for the largely homebound middle class women has experienced so much scholarly neglect. As cited earlier, women wrote profusely and published a significant number of periodicals in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century also women have written a lot, particularly short stories and poems. There have been quite a few successful women novelists as well. In recent years some anthologies of short stories have been published, and some novels have been reprinted and translated but there has been a singular lack of substantial critical assessments of these writings from the perspective of either literary studies or historical studies. The existing works also do not comprehensively examine the period that this work focuses on, 1930-1955. There has been some very good work on the famine, and *Tebhaga*, as also on the communist movement and the revolutionary movement. In the last few years quite a few studies on women's experience of partition have been published, like Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta edited *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* and Gargi Chakravartty's *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*. Then there are earlier works like Ghulam Murshid's *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation 1849-1905* and Meredith Borthwick's *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* which looks at the social history of the later half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand Dagmer Engel's exemplary work *Beyond Purdah?*

[48] Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. xiii.

Women in Bengal, 1890-1930 takes a look at the period after the first generation of reformers like Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar had passed away, leaving the field to the younger Brahmos and Hindu *bhodrolok* to engage in social reform, up to 1930 when the impact of the Brahmo-led reform zeal began to wane. There is also Malavika Karlekar's work that provides glimpses of aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal through women's autobiographical writings that range from full-length books to essays in journals and pamphlets. These texts were written between 1868 and 1967.

One extremely important work to emerge in the last ten years has been Geraldine Forbes' *Women in Modern India*,[49] which is a comprehensive history of Indian women in the twentieth century. This work creates a basic structure along with making available new data and documents, which have already been useful for researchers working in the diverse areas of women's studies in India. Forbes has identified non-conventional sources as treasure troves of historical data. She has recovered diaries, letters, journals, pamphlets, articles, magazines, photographs while also building an archive of oral history by mining the fragile memories of a generation of women. Forbes delineates the general history of the period from time to time through her setting of the tale of Indian women against these general outlines. This is a significant strategy because though it is women's story, it is important to locate it in the mainstream historical narrative otherwise we run the risk of an unintentional marginalisation of the story. This is what this thesis also aims to do, where women's tense story of negotiating to construct their identity during the making of a new and modern nation is situated within the dominant political, social and economic narratives, sometimes subverting these narratives, at other times pointing to omissions.

Forbes moves from the general to the particular,in that she describes the larger historical trends before moving down to the regions to examine the regional variations. Then the focus is narrowed further as she examines a few

[49] Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

individuals and their impact on the times as also the impact of the times on them. Consequently Forbes accommodates variations within a generalised framework, enabling an open reading of the theme being discussed. The broad themes that her work deals with are nineteenth century reforms, female education, the emergence of women's organisations and the movement for women's rights, women in the nationalist movement, women's work in colonial India and women's role in politics and economics and women's movement in contemporary India. The strength and the limitation of Forbes' work is the large geographical and chronological scale that it deals with. In terms of female education, the book provides a comprehensive overview but does not critically analyse the complex, divided state of female education in the late colonial period and the early post colonial period. In terms of the emergence of women in nationalist and other political movements, Forbes' enquiry raises the further query about the cause and effect of women's participation in the political movements. Why did the political organisations involve women, why were women inspired to join and what impact did this have on the political sphere and in the lives of women? Similarly with regard to waged work, what were the different areas that were opening up to women, how and why and what was the economic contribution that women were making to their families and society? How did this, if at all, impact on the workplace itself and the perception of women in a patriarchal society? Forbes' analysis looks at some areas in which women were working but there is no detailed evaluation of all the sectors that were employing women, the positions they occupied, the working conditions and their wages.

There are two important studies of Bengali women in the nineteenth century that emerged in the early 80s, Ghulam Murshid's *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905* (1983)[50] and Meredith Borthwick's *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (1984).[51] While Ghulam Murshid seeks to examine the 'modernisation' of the Bengali *Bhodromohila* in the period that encompasses some 56 years

[50] Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905* (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983).
[51] Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

between the starting of the first Government school for girls and the *Swadeshi* movement in the wake of Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905, Borthwick looks at how the *Bhodromohila* adapted to the changing social conditions spurred by the interaction of the colonial and native cultures and the rising consciousness about the 'degraded' status of women. Both Borthwick and Murshid focus their attention on the *Bhodromohila*, a category of women described by Borthwick as the womenfolk of the English-educated professional Bengali middle class or *Bhodrolok*. Murshid recognises that this is a small subsection of middle class Bengali women, which is a small percentage of the entire population of Bengali women. Yet he reckons that they are important subjects for history because of the way historical events have had an impact on their lives and this was also a category of women that was the special product of the 'modernisation' process in nineteenth century Bengal. While it is true that the impact of the social reforms and colonial influence is best visible in the life of the *Bhodromohila*, a study that focuses on the *Bhodromohila* also is quite limited in that it looks at the story of only 1% of the population, consisting of high caste and urban women only. One remarkable achievement of both these books is that they translate the excitement of the period, counterpointing it to the not so 'dramatic' impact of the reforms (Borthwick). These books also sketch the process of the creation of the *Bhodromohila* identity. Neither Borthwick nor Murshid question this category of the *Bhodromohila*, assumed to be the female counterpart of the *Bhodrolok*. The politics of identity that gives rise to a category as that of the *Bhodromohila* has not been adequately analysed and leaves a critical issue for further research and analysis. How is the category created and what are the features of the *Bhodromohila*? Why was it important to create this category? Even Partha Chatterjee, though he posits a theory about the politics that necessitated the creation of a new breed of Bengali woman, gives no delineation of the image of the *Bhodromohila*, which would be a composite product of prescriptions and the material reality of the woman in the *ondormohol*.[52] Unpacking the *Bhodromohila* term is important for the self-

[52] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

definition of increasing number of middle class women in the twentieth century with their aspirations to class mobility and respectability. When Murshid makes the point that the impact of the social reforms is best visible in the life of the *Bhodromohila,* who belongs to a small subsection of the female Bengali population, it gives rise to queries about the class characteristics of the reforms and the political implication of this both for the colonial administration and the nationalists.

Borthwick and Murshid have taken slightly different approaches to their subject. While Murshid uses a wide range of materials to examine the impact of the social changes in the life and mental world of the *Bhodromohila*, in Borthwick's work her interviews of women figure prominently (she also uses journals for and by women, biographies and autobiographies, instructive literature and private papers) as she tries to bring into focus the intimate world of the *ontohpur* to understand the nature of the changes in familial and social roles of women. Borthwick delineates the traditional roles of women and then examines how female education and contemporary debates of women's issues have an impact on conjugal relations, on wifely duties and on the notion of motherhood, as also their emergence in public life. Ghulam Murshid uncovers many new documents, which is very useful for other researchers. He looks closely into statistics of female students for example to see the break-up in terms of caste and religion. As he uses reports and auto/biographical writings, the women whose life he is able to examine are usually from front-ranking enlightened and sometimes anglicised families, which again limit a work of this nature. However, Murshid delineates the social trends quite perceptively and examines the responses of a section of Bengali women to these trends. In Murshid's analysis though women wanted to better their state they did not perceive themselves as victimised individuals and did not contemplate 'emancipation'. Murshid also indicates a basic change in the family framework as it moves from the joint family system to a nuclear one with the power that was invested in the elderly *korta-ginni* of the joint household coming to rest solely on the young husband in a nuclear household.

An interesting point that Borthwick makes is about the construction of the tradition/modern, Indian/Western, *Bhodrolok/Chotolok* binaries in the debates about the 'recasting' of the Bengali woman, which is quite useful in understanding the trajectory that the reforms adopt. As the 'modern' woman's identity was not projected in opposition to the man, the man/woman or sexual binary was not focussed on or indeed analysed. It is interesting that even the prevalence of oppressive practices is explained by couching it in terms of corrupt traditions and misreading or ignorance of religious and cultural texts, while the role of the patriarchy is downplayed if not completely glossed over. This is indicative of the general attitude to reform, which would spill over into the twentieth century and manifest itself differently in the endeavours of the liberal feminists, who were reluctant to examine the workings of patriarchy and its nexus with other institutions. A problem in Murshid's work is the insufficient interrogation of the term 'modernisation', and in locating women's agency in their 'modernisation' he seems to gloss over the fact that the approach and attitude of different women to 'modernisation' differed according to the position and roles within the family and society, the educational level and economic position within the society among other factors. While Murshid explains that the term 'modernisation' may not be entirely satisfactory, he does not problematise the term, which is quite complex and can be read very differently from different subject positions, making it an extremely contentious term in a politics of identity in which 'tradition' and 'modernity' are played off against each other.

Dagmer Engels' *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal, 1890-1930* engages in a close examination of the personal sphere of the Bengali woman's life, focussing on the custom of *purdah*, on female sexuality, the politics of childbirth and lives as brides and widows.[53] Engels also concerns her work with the *Bhodromohila* category where the term *Bhodrolok* is used in a broader sense as emerging from the concept of respectability that entailed 'abstention from manual labour'.[54] Engels does not interrogate this

[53] Dagmer Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal, 1890-1930* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999).
[54] J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, cited in Dagmer Engels, p.10.

categorisation any further but assumes it to be an imprecise and rather fluid term. This poses problems as she analyses colonial and Bengali discourses on femininity as worked out in the areas of 'the family, in educational institutions and at work'. As the *Bhodromohila* becomes a large amorphous category with no well defined contours, the different social and economic factors that structure the lives of the women who are located variously in the social spectrum cannot be clearly segregated and analysed. The one area where this limitation is most apparent is in Engel's analysis of the area of women's work in the Bengal economy. Engels illustrates how women were always part of an agricultural economy despite the notion of *purdah*. Poverty, debts, low returns meant that women had to work in various kinds of agricultural work to be paid in cash or kind to sustain their families. Engels points how these avenues of income generation were slowly being closed to women in the colonial economy. Occupations like rice husking, spinning and weaving were being mechanised, which meant that illiterate, poverty-stricken rural women could no longer do these jobs which were now being done by men. Hence there were many women who were forced to take up jobs in domestic service. The number of women domestic servants increased by 300 percent between 1921 and 1931. Women's work in the jute mills, mines and tea plantations are also examined in this book. The only problem with Engels' analysis here is that the boundaries of the term *Bhodromohila* are stretched too far. While conceding that it is an imprecise, fluid and broad based descriptive term for a group of people, yet it must also be taken into account that the term *Bhodrolok-Bhodromohila* operates within a class dimension. The *Bhodromohila* were indeed going out to work but whether the women who were working as domestic servants, and in mines, plantations and mills can be placed under the rubric of the *Bhodromohila* is open to question. The two professions that the *Bhodromohila* engaged in were teaching and medicine, as we have seen earlier in the nineteenth century. They also earned money by selling their embroidery, stitching, knitting and other such skills in the market. However what other jobs they were doing at this point remain unresearched in Engels' work.

Conversely the private space and familial roles are intensively explored in this work as Engels examines the concept of *purdah* as experienced by the women, their lives as brides and widows and the problematic of their sexuality - which intrigued and frightened men as they sought to harness it for their benefit and pleasure. Engels also explores the politics and conditions in childbirth, which was a momentous and dangerous event in a woman's life in early twentieth-century Bengal. She examines rituals like *broto* that played such an important part in a girl and a woman's life. This analysis of *brotos* and other rituals is extremely important in the politics of identity as they were processes that facilitated socialisation into familial roles while being couched in cultural terms. Engels also examines the nationalising of female education by women like Mataji Tapaswini who set up the Mahakali Pathshala where girls were taught to do *pujo* and *broto* along with academic subjects. It appealed to a lot of Bengali Hindus who were wary of their daughters becoming denationalised in a curriculum set by the British missionaries. Another facet of female education was exemplified by schools such as Maharani Girls' School set up by Hemlata Devi where girls did not have to wear a white uniform as it would be a burden on their parents and classes started later in the day so that they could do some housework in the mornings. These examples clearly illustrate the complex politics of identity the pupils as well as educators encountered where female education was promoted without departing from traditional duties and roles. There was also the element of radicalism in the introduction in the curriculum of hitherto taboo subjects like music and dance, which encouraged self-expression, and in the setting up of Industrial schools by organisations like the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association which trained women in skills that would enable them to work and earn a living. Teacher training schools were also being set up at this time facilitating women to teach in primary schools despite the widespread hostility to the idea of women working and taking up jobs that would otherwise be taken up by men.

Malavika Karlekar's *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* is another pioneering study of Bengali women's history undertaken

through autobiographical writings ranging from essays to full-length books.[55] The texts examined are eleven personal narratives of upper middle class and upper caste Bengali women, two dictated autobiographies and a selection of exhortatory writings. These women were mostly Brahmos except, Rassundori, Rani and Shudha Mazumdar. Over the span of about hundred years women took on the task of reconstructing femininity while juxtaposing it against the 'official' construction of femininity. Karlekar notes that autobiographical writings render those that hitherto were considered as objects into mediating subjects. These writings question both established tradition and new values, as many of these women were quite literally straddling two worlds, that of the resistant-to-change *ontohpur* and the outside world contending with the rapidly changing political and social conditions which their husbands inhabited. The writings depict how they perceived the changes at the personal level and in society at large. Karlekar's work is invaluable in that it establishes a tradition of life writing among Bengali women from the beginning of formal female education in the mid nineteenth century. From the perspective of the current study, these chronicles are a matrix that forms the context and bedrock on which the fictional writings of the twentieth century must be placed. Regardless of the content or the impact of the writings, these personal narratives place in the public sphere for the first time a different and distinct female voice, which is intrinsically a subversive act.

Karlekar's study is a nuanced one where the authors are seen to be neither victims of unequal, hierarchical gender relations in society nor do they fit the bill of the proactive agents. They occupy a grey area in feminist conceptions, where they are conformists but mute compliance cannot be attributed to them. In their personal life these women were dutiful wives and daughters-in-law striving their best to fulfil what was expected of them in the family and society. Their writings, however, depict a range of response to their situation which their lived lives do not bear out. A distinction must be made, as Karlekar emphasises, between dutiful behaviour and an inherent belief in the validity of the existing system. There are authors who assume the patriarchal voice

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[55] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: OUP, 1993).

while there are others who develop independence of thinking and exhibit a surprising amount of determination in their lives even while living their roles as compliant wives and daughters-in-law. For a study of the politics of identity, this poses interesting problems. How do we a read a woman who is compliant in her personal life while carefully enunciating subversive thoughts in her writings? What is the legacy of such women and how do they impact on the lives of the other women around them? The educational system whether of the *zenana* or that followed in schools made writing accessible to these women while also facilitating enquiry, critical thought and self expression. For some women it also opened up a professional world which had to be accommodated with their roles in personal life. Karlekar makes the point that the reaction to change was complex as there was both eagerness and reticence. The 'brave new world' seemed attractive but was unknown while the old restricted world held the comforts of supportive networks even when oppressive.

Barbara Southard's *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal, 1921-1936: The Quest for Political Rights, Education and Social Reform Legislation*, published in 1995, is an incisive study of the politicisation of Bengali women and their organising themselves for reforms that in the nineteenth century had been spearheaded by men exclusively.[56] Southard traces an emerging feminist and socio-political consciousness in Bengali women that informed the founding of *Bongiyo Nari Somaj* in 1921 to push for female suffrage, the Bengal Women's Education League in 1927 to promote female education and to persuade the Bengal Legislative Council to include girls in the proposals for compulsory and universal education, and the All Bengal Women's Union in 1932 to pressurise the Bengal Legislative Council to pass legislation attacking the problem of sexual exploitation and traffic in women and girls. It is interesting that this was a time when the all India women's organisations were also coming to the fore with their avowedly apolitical stance. These organisations in Bengal also steered clear of

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[56] Barbara Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal, 1921-1936: The Quest for Political Rights, Education and Social Reform Legislation* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

nationalist politics, as they had to seek the aid of both the colonial administration and the nationalist parties like the Congress to achieve their objective reforms. However they had only limited success in their efforts. The franchise issue was initially defeated and then passed only on a limited basis in 1925.[57] As far as including girls in proposals for compulsory and universal education was concerned, it never got an adequate hearing from the Legislative Council. In 1933 the Bengal Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act was passed but the organisations deemed it to be too weak to be effective. The lack of success and the frustrations involved in these efforts of the women's organisations in Bengal reflect in microcosm the uphill task that women's organisations in India faced ever since their inception and through the late colonial and early post colonial period. They also encourage new questions regarding the reformative ventures of the nineteenth century, urging us to examine the patriarchal underpinnings and to probe whether the perception of the 'women's question' largely as a response and reaction to colonisation is adequate.

Like the other all India organisations the movements in Bengal for political rights and educational and social reform were largely unsuccessful because they remained the concern of a few educated and socially privileged women. Poverty and illiteracy made mobilisation of large sections of the female population quite difficult. Also in an atmosphere of anti-colonial struggle women found it difficult to articulate feminist concerns, especially those that were critical of patriarchal privileges and assumptions, for fear of being labelled anti-national. Most importantly they failed to forge strong alliances with either the nationalist male politicians or the British officials, who proved to be unreliable allies. Time and again they were let down by the men on both sides of the divide who regarded women's issues as peripheral to their interests. It is interesting how the responses of the political establishments, both the colonial administration and the nationalists, were modulated according to the visibility of a campaign and its impact on public perception. It also places in perspective the gender politics that women had to negotiate

[57] See 'Introduction' pp. 43-44.

within the nationalist movements. These instances also point to the limitations of a liberal feminist strategy that avoided a critique of the patriarchal underbelly of the nationalist movement and opted to negotiate with the system. Also, the class dimensions of feminist politics is revealed rather tragically in Southard's analysis where well-meaning efforts failed because they did not address the realities of large numbers of women, for gender was frequently undercut by class based affiliations.

Two books that are important for understanding a critical phase of the agrarian movements in Bengal are Dhananjay Ray (ed.) *Tebhaga Andolon* (2000)[58] and Peter Custer's *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising: Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership, 1946-47* (1987).[59] While Ray's book is a compilation of essays by various *Tebhaga* activists who record how the movement unfolded in the various districts of Bengal, Custer's work focuses specifically on women participants of *Tebhaga*, both the rural peasant women and the communist women who worked with the peasants. Both these works bring to the fore how women complemented the struggle of the men for more equitable distribution of the harvest initially and then became active participants when the men had to flee from the police and the communist leadership failed to take the movement further. The women then fought with the police and the mercenaries in the pay of the landlords giving the movement a spontaneous militant character. The communist leadership, which was largely urban and male, often did not understand the dynamics of the social and economic relationships between the various sections of the peasantry. Consequently their strategies and planning went against the wishes and wisdom of the local peasants. In Ray's book we find listings of men and women in the various districts who fought for *Tebhaga.* The book also contains various anecdotes that illustrate how women were becoming politically conscious, which meant that not only were they questioning economic exploitation by the *jotdar* (land owner) but they were also questioning why their earning from vegetable growing and poultry farming

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[58] Dhanajay Ray (ed.), *Tebhaga Andolon* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd., 2000).
[59] Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising: Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946-47)* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987).

should be frittered away by the men, as also why their husbands should hit them if they were all comrades. Evidently these poor and illiterate women realised that the concept of rights and oppression did not remain limited to the public sphere but extended to the personal space as well. When read together with Southard's work discussed above, these books reveal a picture of growing politicisation across the classes, though women from different social and economic positions express different concerns. While Southard depicts the failure of the nationalist leadership to address gender concerns, Peter Custers writes how the male leadership of the communist party failed to understand and support the peasant comrades and supporters, as they entered into a militant struggle for *Tebhaga*. On the other hand Custers portrays the success of an organisation like the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* (MARS), which was begun primarily by middle class communist women, in creating local leadership among the affected women who could then carry on the movement on a daily basis. For the current work, which tries to understand the extent and nature of politicisation of Bengali women, Custer's research reveals two important facts: i) the patriarchal, urban and class bias that was incipient in the communist movement and ii) the wide-ranging impact of the democratic practices of a political women's organisation like MARS and how it could empower the struggling rural women activists.

In recent years there have been quite a few publications addressing the subject of partition and women's experience of it. Among the early studies of partition are Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998)[60] and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998).[61] Both these works examine partition as was experienced by people in the west, mainly Punjab. In their work Menon and Bhasin make the case for writing a partition history for women whose bodies became contested territories claimed by both the men of their community and the other. Women had to contend with bereavement, displacement and destitution. It was a trauma to be on the road with others, living in tents in large camps with no

[60] Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).
[61] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

privacy and having to fend for themselves, sometimes in the absence of young men, and sometimes because the men did not earn enough or at all. *Borders and Boundaries* shows how women were victimised by men of both communities, Hindu and Muslim. They became living pawns in the game of honour and territory. The women were subject to violence both within their families and outside. Men killed their wives, young daughters, sisters to prevent their dishonour, even as women requested men from their community to kill them so that they would not be taken by the enemy or committed suicide by either setting fire to themselves or jumping into rivers and wells. If the men of the other community took them, they were raped, disfigured and killed.

The authors regard the forcible recovery of some abducted women as another act of violence against women, now committed by the state. They perceive all these violent acts against women by different perpetrators as connected by an implicit male consensus on the subject of violence against women. There is the unquestioned sanctioning of the violent resolution of the problematic of a woman's sexuality and sexual status, while also insisting on women's silence regarding it, by attributing shame to their person rather than the act of violation or the violator, when the self is violated. Here Menon and Bhasin's use of the term 'male consensus' without any qualifications is questionable. However it must also be accepted that during socio-political cataclysms the violence perpetrated against women does appear to suggest a widespread male complicity if not consensus. Menon and Bhasin also point out the patriarchal and partisan role the state assumes when it 'recovers' women without allowing them to state their preference, with Hindu women recovered to India and Muslim women to Pakistan, even though India is meant to be a secular state, home to both Hindus and Muslims. In the interviews the authors conducted the different responses of women to the circumstances they have been thrown into are also enumerated. For some it remains a trauma that will never heal, while others have used the opportunity of the social upheaval to carve new lives for themselves that would otherwise have been impossible. This holds resonances for refugee women in Bengal, who also had a problematic relationship with the state, as they struggled to

recreate their lives as displaced and destitute people. The way these women negotiated with the traditional notions of femininity and the exigencies of the material circumstances and the apathy and even violence of the state had considerable impact on their lives. This gives rise to the query, how did this struggle, if at all, change the course of gender politics in post partition Bengal?

Urvashi Butalia begins her book with her family's experience of partition when one of her uncles stayed behind with her grandmother and converted to Islam so that he could claim the family property and stay on. She then conducts extensive interviews with people who have experienced and survived partition. Some of these are refugees who came away with their families, some are women who were left to fend for themselves and their children, welfare officers who worked in the camps, women who were part of the rescue and recovery teams and so on. She also explores the notion of honour and territory that women paid for with their lives. Butalia interrogates the various ways in which identity operates during times of crises. For men and women from different sections of the society, one or two facets of their identity could gain precedence over all others, and this in turn would structure their actions as also their remembering of those actions and that time. For the women who experienced aggression and violence, what is the process of reconstruction of their identities? How do they perceive themselves, when the moment of crisis has passed and how do they work through memory and telling? Butalia talks about the novelist Krishna Sobti, a partition refugee, who had said that remembering could be dangerous. What impact does remembering have on the lives of various women and how do they represent their memories and how does it shape the writing of women's narratives? Butalia's work poses many questions for researches on identities and women's narratives, be they oral or written.

The Bengal partition had different characteristics and there are two recent volumes that have studied the partition in the east, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds) *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and*

Partition in Eastern India (2003)[62] and Gargi Chakravartty's *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (2005).[63] Bagchi and Dasgupta make the point that while the displacement in Punjab was a one-time event with the violence and migration restricted primarily to three years, 1947-1950, in Bengal, though there was no violence on the scale of that in Punjab, the migration has been like a slow oozing wound that never quite healed. The exodus continues even now. However, while in Punjab there was large-scale migration in both directions, in Bengal the migration has largely been from the east to the west. The Bengali migration has also been characterised by the widespread creation of an atmosphere of terror without actual violence through the use of rumours of imminent violence and some intermittent outbursts of violence. As in Punjab in Bengal too women were subject to male violence in both communities and from men of both communities. As the editors say, they came to know through indirect means that in many cases men from their own community raped the women.

While the use of women's bodies to re-draw borders and stake claim to territories is an important strand of the partition narrative it is not the only one. Partition narrative is equally about the way 'women retrieve the daily requirements of social reproduction'.[64] Bengali women have built shelters with the men in *jobordokhol* (forcibly occupied) colonies in the face of government apathy towards refugees, they have protected these same shelters during police raids and those by the mercenaries of the landlords, they have gone out to work and kept the rhythm of daily subsistence going. A generation of women have sacrificed their youth and all their aspirations to nurture and care for their families. As in the case of Punjabi refugees, for refugee women in Bengal displacement was a body blow from which some never recovered while others found spaces to spread their wings. Both Menon and Bhasin and Butalia have talked about silences that have formed an integral part of the oral narratives that they have recovered, when it has not been possible to verbally

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[62] Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003).
[63] Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005).
[64] Bagchi and Dasgupta, p.5.

represent the brutalities of the experiences. Bagchi and Dasgupta have quite sensitively used creative and literary texts to represent those silences of the untold stories. For the current work, it is important to note how creative and literary texts have been employed to uncover the personal and social dimension of partition history. The editors have used multiple sources to construct multiple perspectives of partition narratives. These sources reveal the politics of identity that reinforced, destroyed, recast and recreated women's identities as they struggled to rebuild their lives. These documents also portray how identities and roles are re-written in a process that creates new discriminatory and oppressive systems, while also providing opportunities for empowerment.

Coming Out of Partition is a detailed examination of all the events leading up to the Bengal partition, from the gradual arrival of the refugees and their struggle to settle in a new land, moving from the platform of Sealdah Station to the government camps and from the camps to the colonies, to their gradual politicisation as they fought to rebuild their lives. Chakravartty begins her examination with the Noakhali riots and the deliberate creation of a fear psychosis among the minority community in East Pakistan which eventually compels them to migrate to West Bengal. The author has used government reports, police files, legislative assembly debates and newspapers along with novels and oral narratives to juxtapose the official political narrative with the narrative of the people who experienced partition. Particularly important in Chakravartty's account is the politicisation of the women, which was greatly aided by the Communist Party of India as it worked with them in their resettlement work. The author spent her childhood living in the vicinity of a refugee colony with parents who were deeply involved with the Communist party and refugee rehabilitation. The identification that the refugees made with the Communist Party, which organised them in the face of an unresponsive state and a hostile milieu alarmed at the growing influx of new people, was important for the growth of the Communist Party in West Bengal. Chakravartty also explores the cultural shifts that women had to make in terms of dialects, food habits, notion of purity and pollution, and living patterns. Also importantly Chakravartty examines the experience of the Muslim women, those who

stayed on in West Bengal and those who migrated, and how partition changed their lives. Chakravartty has been very careful to ensure that along with the story of human brutality and loss, a story of immense courage and initiative and rebuilding lives is also told. The women emerge out of partition traumatised but not broken, using all their material and immaterial resources to carve out a dignified life for themselves. In both these volumes on the Bengal partition, there is the sense of personal triumph, as women have taken up jobs that have not always fitted in with the stereotype of a woman's job, and have worked towards politicising the workplace, building up organised resistance to exploitative practices at the workplace, and learning the two-pronged strategy of fighting and adapting instead of merely compromising. If the nineteenth century was about the making of the *Bhodromohila,* partition gave rise to a new breed of Bengali women who needed to create a new role model to define themselves by.

Defining key terms

Middle class women: It is widely accepted that the middle class can be regarded as both an economic group (after Marx) and also a status group (following Max Weber). However, we are not always sensitive to the fact that when we apply such classification to women we must look at the category afresh and examine how it applies to women. Quite simply women in Bengali society derive their class status from the patriarch of the family, as indeed do the other members. Young men could leave the fold of the family and acquire their class status but women usually would have no opportunity to acquire class status outside the perimeter of their three primary familial roles of daughter, wife and mother. Economically the middle class was what Tithi Bhattacharya describes as the group with operational control, who controlled the day-to-day resources already allocated and made decisions within a framework laid down by those with strategic control.[65] The ones who had strategic control over investment and resource allocation were the upper or ruling class. This operational group was also distinguished from the working class who did hard manual labour in low-paid petty urban jobs related to trade

[65] Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848-85)* (Delhi, Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 64-65.

or in industries, or as agricultural labourers, often under the supervision of the middle class. Asoka Kumar Sen writes that before the British administration, in Bengal there was no urban middle class, which gradually emerged around the metropolis, district and subdivisional towns with the influx of the rural immigrants.[66] Many of the ideologues of the reformative wave in nineteenth century Bengal came from this class and as historians have noted the middle class concerns are reflected in the legislations drawn up in this period. Sangari and Vaid point out in their introduction to *Recasting Women,* the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) had a clause that firmly protected the economic stake the high castes had in not allowing widows to remarry.[67] These clauses debarred the widow, on remarriage, from any right to maintenance or inheritance from her husband's property, 'as if she had died', and also vested the guardianship of her children with the relatives of her deceased husband. Thus, the clauses ensured that neither wealth nor property would be lost, while any male progeny also remained to continue the lineage and keep the property together.

So what was the middle class Bengali woman apart from being a family member of a middle class man? She was not an economic entity, with limited or no access to resources, in nineteenth century Bengal and to a large extent even in the late colonial period. However the middle class woman was a status group. And here I would like to make clear that I am not discussing the *Bhodromohila* who were an elite group and might or might not belong to the middle class. It was largely urban middle class women who found themselves as contested sites where tradition and liberalism, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, reform and rebellion, tradition and modernity waged their political battles. Needless to say all these classifiers are themselves quite unstable and debatable. Terms like tradition, orthodoxy, modernity tend to be relative and coloured by the subjectivity of the user. However, as ideas travelled to rural Bengal with the men who came to the cities for education or occupational purposes, middle class women in rural Bengal were also exposed to these

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[66] Asoka Kumar Sen, *The Educated Middle Class and Indian Nationalism: Bengal During the Pre-Congress Decades* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1988),p. 4.
[67] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 14-16.

debates. Also there was a fair amount of migration as women from rural Bengal travelled to the urban centres where they would encounter new ideas and new ways of living.

Like its Victorian counterparts, the middle class operated by its code of conduct and morality to distinguish it from other groups. In village communities or in smaller towns where the composition of the communities was mixed and people of different classes lived next to each other, the conduct of girls was closely regulated so that the family reputation was not sullied. In one of the novels, *Paka Dhaner Gan*, Deboki's mother is very upset with her when she finds her using a rod to fish like women from the lower classes. Similarly women from the middle classes followed segregation codes much more rigidly and maintained ritual purity in the kitchen and the *puja* room. However, these strictures about purity and 'right' conduct were more applicable to women in rural Bengal, where the tightly knit society maintained a more rigorous supervision of the women. The novels portray how women like Podma and Lota regulate their conduct when they go to the villages, where their urban way of conduct is frowned on. Podma, for example realises that the rules of segregation are quite strictly enforced and she desists from walking outside and talking to her younger brother-in-law. At the same time, women like Deboki who have been brought up in the village on strict notions as to what a woman could and could not do, finds it possible to visit Kunal at his home on her own, without a chaperone, as also to invite him to her own house when living and working in Calcutta. So the middle class is perceived to be in a flux as the notions of femininity and propriety are perceptively changing. While the village may still be the bastion of the older notions, the women from the village adapt their ways when they go to the city. Similarly some women like Bhodra do not change their ways when they come back to the smaller towns or villages. Bhodra can clearly say that she has rice at night, which was prohibited to a widow and talks to Partho late into the night, which again was scandalous for a young woman and more so for a widow. The conduct of middle class women was one of the registers of self identity of the middle class. The novels suggest that an attempt was always made to reinforce a code of conduct, but due to many social and economic reasons it

was not entirely successful. Shita's mother-in-law, for example tries to regulate her life but is unable to do so as Shita is an independent woman earning her own living.

Another aspect that was emphasised with respect to middle class women was their domestic responsibility and housewifely skill. These were primarily for the educated urban woman. In the numerous conduct books that were published throughout the late colonial period, urban middle class women are exhorted to accomplish their household duties with due sincerity and commitment and not leave the care of the home and the family to domestic helps. Also, educated middle class women were admonished against indulging in wasteful, luxurious habits and advised to manage the household economy well and practise thrift. With regard to the middle class women represented in the novels, it becomes apparent that the profile of this group of women was changing, with the social and economic changes. As mentioned earlier, the Bengal famine of 1943 followed by partition, entailed lot of changes in the various economic and status groups and the middle class woman found herself working with different expectations and codes of conduct where economic survival was more important than the status of the group.

The middle class in Bengal is a large group spanning the spectrum from the wealthy middle level landowners in the villages, to the teachers and professionals in towns and cities to priests, farmers, teachers of tiny village schools, clerical staff in offices and so on. Since women have never been seen as individuals but are subsumed into the family that they belonged to at any point of time, we will consider these women figuring in the novels as middle class women. There are, broadly, three groups of women: rural women, urban women and rural women who have travelled to the urban centres for education or work. However, middle class is used as a generalised term in this work because the grip on a class identity, particularly in the 1940s in Bengal, was quite tenuous. The famine and partition enabled rapid class mobility, where it was possible to ascend by accruing wealth, as also to slide down the class hierarchy. During the famine that actually started before 1943

and continued after, families gradually sold off their assets, continually sliding down the class scale till absolute penury hit them. Respectable, once middle class women from rural farming families were found begging with their children on the streets of cities like Calcutta. In the cities urban women started queuing up before ration shops, as they could not afford to buy food grains from the open market any longer. After the dislocation caused by partition families once again slid down the economic scale as many lost every material possession that they had. With no easily available jobs, and having to build up from scratch while living on railway platforms, refugee camps or forcibly occupied lands, middle class families found themselves sharing space and resources with the lowest of the social strata. The women also found themselves doing jobs that normally would be considered degrading by the family and community.

So how does one categorise these women who have to eke out a living amidst the harsh conditions of an overflowing metropolis like Calcutta? Quite evidently economically they are no longer the comfortable middle classes and during difficult circumstances the middle class customs and cultural practices are abandoned. Hence grouping people in terms of their class is quite difficult since class is not a stable or an essential attribute of a person but a mutable and changing factor. Yet, at the same time the consciousness of class affiliation is very strong among the middle class and they always strive to maintain their class identity. So it is quite usual to find families on the brink of starvation trying to maintain their middle class facade as it is to find families clawing back to the class position they once had and then giving up those practices that jar with middle class gentility, like wives and daughters working in low grade clerical jobs in city offices. Hence the term middle class woman is not without its share of problems. Yet I use it for the women occurring in the novels because most of them would have seen themselves as such, wives and daughters from middle class families. Also in spite of the seesaw movement that was caused by the famine and partition, many families struggled hard and succeeded in regaining in the later years the social and economic position they had lost. So I use the term middle class women

generally and somewhat loosely, while being sensitive to the instability of class identity.

Patriarchy: This work refers to the patriarchy and patriarchal practices and it is pertinent to clarify what is meant by patriarchy. Sangari and Vaid write about how patriarchy often becomes an ahistorical category within an originating myth of male coercion.[68] They point out both the strength and the weakness of this position. The strength lies in the fact that this position 'foregrounds patriarchal oppression as existing within all historically known modes of production and as a socio-cultural system cutting across class divisions.'[69] The weakness lies in its attributing to women a common subject position, disregarding the reality where women work within exploitative systems and may identify closely with the patriarchy that exploits other women.

For long social scientists like Weber have used patriarchy to refer to a system of government in which men ruled societies through their position as heads of households. Subsequently feminists from different ideological positions have further analysed the concept to explore the myriad facets and the way it works through social, cultural, political and economic structures. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.[70] Her careful use of the term social structure rejects biological determinism and the positioning of individual men and women in dominant and subordinate positions respectively. In my work patriarchy has been perceived as an ideology and a practice that perpetuates, upholds and promotes a social, economic and political order that is geared towards male hegemony. In that sense the idea of patriarchy exists throughout history but the workings of it is race, culture, religion, class and time specific. Hence the specificities of patriarchal ideology and practice vary even within a cultural community over a historical period. Walby posits that in Britain patriarchy as a system of social relations has existed 'in articulation

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[68] Sangari and Vaid, p.23.
[69] *Ibid*, p. 23.
[70] Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), pp. 19-24.

with capitalism, and with racism'.[71] In Bengal, along with capitalism there are the twin factors of class and caste to consider as these factors interface with patriarchal practices making the experience of patriarchy different for women coming from different castes and classes. In the colonial period, patriarchy had also been instrumental in colonialist practices as also in nationalist ideology and practice. In *Theorizing Patriarchy* Walby identifies six structures of patriarchal practice: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions, which are relatively autonomous while having causal effects upon each other. This delineation of the spheres of patriarchal operation is important in two ways. Firstly it gives the concept of patriarchy a distinct shape, constructing a theoretical framework within which feminist analysis can function. Furthermore it addresses the problem of the far from satisfactory monocausal theory of women's condition by outlining the multiple practices and nexus that patriarchy forms with other social structures. Further, Walby also makes a distinction between private and public patriarchy. She writes, 'in private patriarchy the expropriation of women's labour takes place primarily by individual patriarchs within the household, while in the public form it is a more collective appropriation.'[72] While this distinction made by Walby is quite useful, as it will be evident from the analysis that I make, the spheres are not exclusive of each other and the public and private areas of experience work on each other in a cause-effect relationship. Another significant analysis of the theoretical problem of patriarchy comes from Judith Bennet who unravels the male oppressor/female victim binary. Bennet writes, 'Women have not been merely passive victims of patriarchy; they have also colluded in, undermined and survived patriarchy.'[73] When exploring patriarchal practices, it is quite important to understand this problematic relationship that women have with patriarchy, which influences how they counter or negotiate with the patriarchy. For middle class Bengali women the patriarchal politics varied according to the historical exigencies and their 'becoming' has depended on their

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[71] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[72] *Ibid., p.20.*
[73] Judith M. Bennet, 'Feminism and History' in Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p.67.

negotiation of these politics. In the late colonial period the patriarchy operated through nationalist politics for the recreation of itself and the positing of a 'new' woman to keep pace with its evolution.

Empowerment: In this work the two terms that have been frequently used to indicate the impact of the changes on the lives of middle class Bengali women are empowerment and sometimes, emancipation. None of these two terms have been used as absolutes but are used to indicate a state of reduced dependence and a state of being enabled, possessed of greater agency. In her work on women's employment and the family in Calcutta, Hilary Standing says that the concept of emancipation 'encompasses more than economic independence. It signifies also the possibility of full social citizenship, of being enabled to act as a person, not simply as a legal and ideological dependent.'[74] This thesis, as indeed the authors of the novels being analysed or the characters themselves do not with any degree of certainty understand what emancipation or empowerment as absolute terms are. Yet it is possible to be articulate about a lack of power to act, which itself becomes a self definition. In a perverse way it is easier to understand these two terms by their lack. Hence empowerment is about a state where one is not absolutely powerless, as emancipation is about a condition where one is not literally or metaphorically enslaved. These are qualitative terms suggesting an ideal state but never defining it. They are also quite subjective terms and the understanding what these terms entail varies from person to person, which also make it difficult to define them. In this work, they are used relatively as per the character and the situation in which the term has been used. What a widow without any economic assets may regard as emancipatory or empowering may not be similarly perceived by the matriarch of a decaying feudal family. However, generally the two terms suggest a relative improvement in the condition of dependence and the ability to act of one's own volition. Empowerment does not signify the possessing of materials like a home and financial resources but these material conditions may be empowering if the subject feels that she is in a position of relative strength

[74] Hillary Standing, *Dependence and Autonomy: Women's Employment and the Family in Calcutta* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), p.1.

and able to act as she wants. Similarly though emancipation literally means the state of liberation or independence, it is always relative except in an ideal state and women may find they have acquired a degree of freedom to act as their own person while in most other aspects of their life they operate within claustrophobic regulatory or supervisory mechanisms. In the politics of identity, these two terms suggest the creation of a space by the female characters where they can work around their own self definition and be an active agent impacting on their surroundings.

Modernity: The term modern is defined as 'relating to the present or recent times as opposed to the remote past' (OED, p.1128). An attempt is often made, consciously or otherwise, to conflate modernity with progress. In so far as progress is understood to be moving forward in a chronological sense, the two can be treated as synonymous. However that is usually not the case and we regard progress as signifying an improvement over the way things were in the recent or remote past. In this work modernity is used to signify the contemporary state and also sometimes to suggest the impression that was sought to be created that 'modern' meant progress or improvement. In popular parlance modernity is frequently equated to a qualitative advancement, or a breakdown of old, established and respected ways of living and conduct, and consequent degeneration. Thus, this word must be read in its context to grasp the meaning it is conveying. The use is often qualified and circumspect. It denotes change of sorts and does not always perceive this change to be progress or improvement, even when it appears to be so. Modernity is an ambiguous concept and its usage is often controversial, ironic or suggesting superficial alterations and these qualifications should be kept in mind when reading this term here.

Change: This is a term that has been frequently used in this thesis in either as a noun meaning a process through which things alter or become different from what they were, or as a verb meaning 'to become different'. It is a key term linked to other terms elucidated earlier like emancipation and modernity. When used to indicate a process, it denotes a gradual movement, which is perceived as either positive or negative according to the ideological position of

the observer. By itself, however, change is a neutral term merely indicating a shift or alteration. Qualifications are attributed to it retrospectively. In this thesis change is perceived to be operating in the social sphere, where the changes are hesitant but easily discernible, and also in the personal sphere where the changes are subtle and difficult to discern. Fictional writings can bring these subtle, personal changes to the fore better than other historical documents.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the politics of identity that Bengali women found themselves negotiating, as objects that were to be refashioned and recreated. I argue that in Bengal, middle class women were not passive objects to be 'made' in the image of patriarchal prescriptions. While it certainly helped that the 'recasting' ideology was fractured, women also on their part resisted, manipulated and subverted the process of construction of the 'modern' Bengali woman. The political turbulence and then the catastrophe of partition worked rapidly to transform the images of the new middle class Bengali woman that were being generated by the political establishments, conduct books, popular literature, reports among others. After partition the struggle for survival and the immense changes brought about in the host society by large scale migration ensured that the older role models became irrelevant and the erstwhile *Bhodromohila* jostled for living space with the petty bourgeoisie woman, travelling for work and witnessing the merging of the ritually pure private space with the public space. Bengali middle class women of the late colonial and early post colonial period found their notion of identity being constantly challenged and undergoing mutations. They also took advantage of the social and political flux to try to extend the perimeters of their identity. It must also be kept in mind that the young women growing up at this time stretched the notion of what the Bengali woman could be without any definite vision. Often they are unsure of what they could be or what they want to be. The publication of two radically different books like Santisudha Ghosh's *Golokdhãdha* (1938), about the struggle of young girl for self-definition and Omiyobala's *Ma o Meye* (1938), a conduct book instructing daughters how to fulfil their marital responsibilities, at nearly the same time, suggests the widely

disparate ideas about a woman's selfhood that were in circulation amongst Bengali women in the mid twentieth century.

The quarter of a century, from Gandhi's call for the Civil Disobedience movement to the passage of the Hindu Code Bill, was a promising epoch for Bengali women. It was a time of suffering and death and utter destitution, which ironically signified freedom because usual rules were in abeyance. It meant that women could do much that would be impossible in normal times. If they lost a home and everything with it, it also meant that while creating a new home they were equal partners with the men, if not greater. In other words the cataclysm caused by politics, war and famine provided Bengali women with an opportunity to live lives that had not been lived earlier by their mothers and grandmothers. But what did this generation of Bengali women do with that opportunity? When they stood before the mirror what did they see in that mirror, what did they want to see? This thesis looks at those images of the Bengali woman, as represented in the novels of four Bengali women writers.

Chapter 2: Education: The Making of the Bengali Woman

Girl reading, taken at the well known studio of Edna Lorenz, Calcutta, c.1930s

Courtsey: Sumit Chakravartty, New Delhi

Malavika Karlekar, *Visualizing Indian Women 1875-1947 (New Delhi: OUP 2006)*

Prologue

"... a woman unless she submits is neither a mule
nor a queen
though like a mule she may suffer
and like a queen pace
the floor "

(Alice Walker, ' Janie Crawford', *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning)*

Simone de Beauvoir's comment, 'A woman is not born but made'[75] is particularly relevant to any discussion regarding female education. Education or the lack of it is accepted to be one of the primary tools in the 'making' of a woman in a certain 'image'. However this 'making' and the 'image' itself is problematic because of the number of people with their different agendas who have a stake in the 'making' of women. While I will go on to discuss the patriarchal positions on female education influenced by class, caste, rural/urban, nationalist/colonialist, reformist affiliations, it will be pertinent to point out that women themselves were the most important stakeholders in their own making. Their agency, as has been mentioned earlier in the introductory chapter, in creating a new image of themselves, makes this a participative 'becoming' exercise. Bengali women were certainly keen to transform themselves and their lives as well as that of their daughters through education. The uneducated thought of themselves as low and vile as they had not been touched by enlightened thoughts in their corner of the house, the inner quarters or the *ontohpur.* While most women did not know if they were actually vile since their circumscribed life did not offer them much chance to exhibit their vileness, they perceived themselves as the lowest of the low, illiterate and ignorant having no access to knowledge and living limited lives like frogs in a well. For reformers and nationalists in nineteenth century Bengal female education was seen as a tool to address the problem of the low status of women that had earned them much criticism from the British. The query was what would be the nature of these improvements? What was the Bengali woman to be? The answer to these questions would frame the education of the Bengali woman.

It would not do to 'unsex' her or indeed 'de-nationalise' her.[76] She should not acquire masculine attributes through her education but retain her softness,

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[75] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. and ed. by H.M. Parshley (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 281.

[76] 'Strishiksha O Striswadhinata', *Tattabodhini Patrika,* No. – Dec., 1878, cited in Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905* (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983), p.47. The article says 'The books women are asked to read are either translation from English or are English-influenced. Consequently our women become denationalised. We believe women should read only those books that will help them to become better wives and better mothers.'

nurturing and maternal instincts, patience and a spirit of self-sacrifice. Neither should she emulate the western woman, becoming divorced from tradition and culture. Partha Chatterjee has argued in 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question'[77] that Indian men thought their capitulation in the public sphere of political and economic power to the colonialists must be countered by keeping the spiritual and cultural space inviolate. It is one of those contradictions in patriarchal ideology that while 'nature' is apportioned to women and culture to men, women are considered instrumental for the preservation and propagation of the cultural heritage of a people. Chatterjee proposes that under colonial rule Bengali women were entrusted with keeping the spiritual core of Bengali culture pristine, away from the colonial influence. So while the men wore suits, smoked cheroots and drank port, read English Literature and worked for colonial administration, the women were expected to fight cultural colonialism. They were designated the signifier of the culture of the nation untainted by western civilisation, embodying the inviolable spiritual core of a people within the *ontohpur.* I will propose here that it might be useful to adopt a different perspective to understand the issue of female education in Bengal. The patriarchy operates through the allegiance of the subjects to its ideology, obtained through consent and/or coercion. A possible threat to patriarchy and any kind of social cohesion is posed by individualism, promoting individual's desires over social codes and goals.

A characteristic feature of Indian society had been the primacy of the collectivity (family/society or *somaj*/religion etc.) in the psyche of the people.[78] While the collectivity can be an invaluable support network, it is also likely to aid the perpetuation of social inequalities like the inequalities in gender

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[77] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990) pp.233-53. According to Chatterjee, the nationalist ideology separated the domain of culture into two spheres in its efforts to counter the dominance of colonialism. These were the material sphere, where the western civilization was most powerful, and the spiritual sphere. The material sphere influenced and conditioned the colonised people but was eventually unimportant as it was external to them unlike the spiritual sphere that lies within and is the essential self. If this spiritual distinctiveness of the culture is lost, then the true identity is lost. The home represents the inner spiritual self of the colonised Indians and women represent this essential self. Hence, the problem of women's identity is integrally linked to the discourses of nationalism.

[78] David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), pp. 2-3.

relationships among others. In nineteenth century Bengal industrialisation and urbanisation had already started social fragmentation. The Hindus found themselves caught in a double bind in the wake of criticisms about the state of Hindu women. Measures to improve the status of high caste Bengali women had to be taken but not at the cost of the disintegration of the Hindu patriarchal society. I would argue that female education gave rise to consternation amongst reformists and nationalists alike because it threatened to sow the seeds of individualism amongst the women, which would spell the demise of the Hindu patriarchy. As long as Bengali women identified with the family and Hindu *somaj*, the individualistic western education that men received would not rend the fabric of Hindu society and most importantly the hegemony of the patriarchy would not be challenged. That is why it was important that Bengali women did not emulate western women who were perceived to be individualistic and not submissive to the social order. Whether that was true is another matter. Hence, I think the strategy was to use education, among other devices, to promote the familial identity of the Bengali girls.

It was envisaged that while education would enlighten Bengali women and might lead them to ask questions that could be uncomfortable for the patriarchal social framework, it would not eventually destabilise the patriarchal society. So from 'An Anglo-Bengali Primer Containing Easy Lessons in Spelling and Reading for the use of Hindu Females' (1850) that is peppered with such sentences, 'A kind husband and obedient children, the book, the needle, and the pen, are woman's greatest earthly blessings', to *Sorola Chorit* (1868) and *Susheelar Upakhyan* (1860s)[79] that advise young girls how to conduct themselves as young girls, wives and mothers, to a text as late as Omiyobala's *Ma o Meye* (1938) which is a mother's instructions to a daughter, female education continually reiterated the familial roles and responsibilities of women and firmly emphasised their relational identities. When the country

[79] These are educational texts from the nineteenth century for young women. An Anglo-Bengali Primer, containing easy lessons in spelling and reading for the use of Hindu Females (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1850), p.97. Tarkaratna, Mathuranath, *Sarala Charit* (Calcutta, 1868). Mukhopadhyaya, Madhusudan, *Susheelar Upakhyan* (Calcutta, 1859 –1st part, 1869 – 2nd part, 4th edition, 1861 – 3rd part, 2nd edition).

was imagined as a mother and therefore women were perceived as the symbolic mother and symbol of the country, the idea was to embed women firmly within the matrix of the family and blunt the potential radical edge of nationalist politics, which could transform the Bengali family. From the standpoint of the feminists and the authors of the novels also, rampant individualism should not be encouraged. From their perspective it was important for women to identify with each other and an advantaged woman had to work to ensure that other women could improve their lives. Women, particularly older women thwart and oppress younger women in the novels but there is also a sisterhood that is imagined where women whether not known to each other or related help each other out. Hence, individualism that borders on self-centredness was undesirable for these women as well. At the same time they did not want the female identity to be limited to that of a wife and mother. Thus, from the beginnings of female education in nineteenth century Bengal, it was recognised by all concerned that this instrument of 'making' of the new Bengali woman must be carefully regulated. Consequently the framing of female education continued to be an important issue even in twentieth century Bengal.

In writing on education and equality, M S Gore says that while it is generally believed that education by itself is supportive of social change, much actually depends upon what the content of the educational message is and who the educators are.[80] Gore's observation indicates that we have to be sensitive to these factors when assessing the impact of education on the 'making' of the 'modern' Bengali woman and perceive how the politics of identity meshes with the discourses on female education. Schools with 'nationalist' leanings varied widely according to who the educators were and their personal conception of female education as well as according to their geographical location and the class of students they were trying to admit. However, education was also not simply that which was imparted in schools. The education to 'becoming' a woman was also carried on informally in the home by mothers and other

[80] M.S. Gore, *Education for Women's Equality* (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1988) p. 6.

elderly female relatives. The book *Ma O Meye* has a domestic setup where a mother imparts lessons to her daughter teaching her about her primary roles, as a wife and a mother, much like the nineteenth century *Susheelar Upakhyan*. In Shudha Mazumdar's autobiography we are told how she followed the curriculum set up by the British school while also doing *Pujo* and *Brotos* (religious rituals) at home. While her father wanted to send her to board at a missionary school, her mother brought her back and ensured that the little Shudha learnt Hindu customs.[81] Consequently in her own life Shudha negotiated her western education and the Hindu customs she was taught at home.

The education of Shudha Mazumdar illustrates clearly how some women were caught in the conflicting drifts of becoming a 'modern' but quintessentially Bengali woman and how education constitutes one of the sites of struggle and negotiation. Involved in the attempt to 'make' Shudha into a woman after their own understanding and imagination, Shudha's 'westernised' father and the nuns of the missionary school had to repeatedly counter her mother's and the elderly female relations' notion of a high caste Hindu woman. It would be simplistic to read Shudha' mother's efforts at 'making' a 'proper' Hindu woman out of Shudha simply as a conservative or regressive action. It was a protective act, which perceived the education in the missionary school as potentially harmful for her daughter if it made her into a woman who did not fit into the ways of Hindu society. Being exiled or ostracised from the kith and kin network was the worst fate that could befall anyone, specially a woman. So she proceeds to equip Shudha with the credentials of a Hindu woman through her training at home. In the early years

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[81] Shudha Mazumdar, *A Pattern of Life: The Memoirs of an Indian Woman* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1977), pp. 15- 24, 37-44. Shudha describes the transition from the rituals at home to the student at the Convent: 'So, on the 14th of April (New Year's day in Bengal), Mother made me undertake my first *brata*, the Shiva *puja*. I was then eight years old and learned to perform the little ritual every morning before I went to school. For this, the first *niyama* was observed; that is, I had to have a good bath and wear a crimson silk *cheli* sari, the correct dress for the occasion... Rising early in the morning, I first bathed and changed, and then I ran to the garden to pick some flowers and fresh young blades of *durva* grass with which to perform the *puja*. The ritual had to be finished before I could have breakfast, dress, and run, in frock and pigtails, to be ready at the gate where I waited breathlessly for a school bus that arrived unfailingly at 8.30 a.m.'

of the twentieth century there was this anxiety about the negative impact female education could have on the lives of daughters. It was no longer the concern about 'learning' bringing on widowhood but about the outcome of education, what the girl would 'become'. It must not be assumed, however, that women were passive and pliant objects to be moulded into an image. Women realised that while education was an instrument for recasting, it also provided them with the resources to negotiate in this process of 'making' and 'becoming'.

The state of female education and emerging issues

In the twentieth century the wave of reformist tendencies perceived in the nineteenth century were no longer there but the play of identity politics around the making of the modern woman continued. The construction of Indian women continued to be crucial to the nationalist project and this period is also full of prescriptions for modern, sophisticated Bengali women.[82] Women found themselves as signifiers of the nation, which was imagined as the mother, *Bharat mata*, as also the image of *Shakti* who infuses courage in her sons to take revenge for the enemy's desecration of the mother. In the early twentieth century the image of the young Sarala Devi with her long open hair was such an inspiring image of *Shakti,* as she encouraged the young men to prove their valour and physical prowess. The later Gandhian movement from 1930 onwards created a different image of the patient and long suffering virtuous woman who will convert the brute power of the coloniser by virtue of her steadfast and non-violent striving. The Gandhian model for women emphasised the purity and truth of the dutiful and faithful wife and loving mother.[83] Such a woman was the ideal helpmeet of the man, who assisted him in running and keeping the family and worked with him in the cause of the nation when that became necessary. Hence, with the changing tenor of nationalist politics the image of the new woman was also changing. However,

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[82] These were texts such as Souresh Chandra Choudhury's *Hindu Nari* (Calcutta: Baniniketan, 1938), Nandalal Mukhopadhyay's *Swami-Stri* (1933), Uma Devi's *Balika Jibon* (1930) among others. More details about these books are there in the final chapter 'Becoming Good Wives and Mothers'.

[83] See Karuna Ahmed Chanana, 'Gandhi, Women's Roles and The Freedom Movement', Occasional Papers, NMML, New Delhi.

this is not to say that there was a consensus among the male nationalists about the image of the recast woman. The fearless, warrior woman image that was projected by Subhash Bose's Rani of Jhansi regiment,[84] for example, was diametrically opposed to the patient and passive Sita image that Gandhi promoted. To complicate matters, if we look into the debates on various legislations regarding personal laws that were being presented in the legislative houses, the widely different perspective on women the nationalists had becomes apparent. Thus, it appears that the changing political history made different demands on women and their education had to be geared so that they could meet these demands. For example as the revolutionary movement captured the imagination of the people in Bengal, in many nationalistic girls' schools physical training was incorporated in the education. Lila Nag's Dipali schools, among others, provided physical training for girls.

However, what must be noted is that overall the percentage of girls attending school continued to be quite low. While at the beginning of the twentieth century the female literacy rate for the whole of India stood at 0.9%, by the time India became a free nation the rate had crept up to only a mere 7.9%.[85] Even in 1919, about 98.3% of all school-going girls were in the primary stage.[86] More than a decade later, in 1932, only 394 girls became matriculate in Bengal.[87] Subsequently, of these numbers, a few would go on to college. So the propagation of education proceeded at a slow pace. It was dependent on religion, class and caste factors. While most Brahmo and Indian Christian girls would be sent to school, among Hindu girls, those, whose families that had been influenced by western civilization, were more likely to attend school. As for Muslim girls, it was the establishment of Begum Rokeya's Sakhawat Memorial School that really pushed the way forward in formal education while the establishment of Lady Brabourne College in 1939 opened up the portals of higher education for them.

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[84] See Lakshmi Sahgal, *A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs of a Political Activist* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997).
[85] Lakshmi Misra, *Education of Women in India, 1921-1966* (Macmillan and Company Limited, 1966), p.5.
[86] *The Report of the Calcutta University Commission, 1917-1919* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1919), Chapter 14.
[87] Dagmer Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal, 1890-1930* (Delhi: OUP, 1999), p.173.

The kinds of schools catering to female education varied. The standards of many of them were quite indifferent even in the twentieth century and the students would barely learn the basics. Attitudes to female education also varied widely between and within families and that would finally decide if and where the girl would study and what. The autobiographical accounts and the biographical notes along with the novels of Jyotirmoyee Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Sabitri Ray and Sulekha Sanyal illustrate the uneven state of female education across the social board. This unevenness is also illustrative of the varied images of the ideal woman that different sections of society espoused ,resulting in women making difficult negotiations between these conflicting images. For example, there was a section like Subornolota's in-laws in Ashapurna Devi's novel who did not send daughters to school at all and deemed female education to be a taboo, while there were others like Jyotirmoyee Devi's parents who had a tutor come in for a few years to teach the girls elementary Bengali. Ashapurna herself had no formal education and learnt Bengali by watching the boys of the family read and write. In rural Bengal some parents like those in Sulekha Sanyal's protagonist Chhobi's village sent their daughters to the village *pathshala* for two or three years. Some parents wanted to send their daughters to schools that taught about Hindu tradition and rituals along with basic education in reading, writing and arithmetic like the Mahakali Pathshala in Calcutta,[88] while others would educate their daughters in a more nationalistic environment as found at the Bethune School. There were also parents like Shudha Mazumdar's father who sent her to St. Theresa's School for Girls to equip her to become the wife of an official in the British administration. Evidently the educational message,

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[88] See Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, pp.49-51 and Dagmer Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal, 1890-1939*, pp.166-168. Kalidas Nag describes the curriculum followed at Mahakali Pathshala in his book *Bethune School and College Centenary Volume 1849-1949*: The Mahakali Pathshala published its own text books, *Mahakali Path*, parts 1 and 2 (Bengali Reader specially meant for girls), *Mahakali Sanskrit Path, Mul Ramayana,* (portions of the original Sanskrit Ramayana with their Bengali translation), *Sadhwi Sadachar* (intended to teach morality to the girls on Hindu precedents), *Prasnottarmala* (a catechism also meant for the training of girls on the above lines), *Stutimala* (a book of hymns or *Stotras* with Bengali translation), *Shiva Puja Paddhati* (with notes, etc.). The institution had seven classes and in the highest class Sanskrit *Raghuvangsah, Rijupath, Upakramanika Byakaran* were taught as well as *Bangla Byakaran, Kadambari* and *Kabita Prasanga* in Bengali.

that M S Gore talks about, which these schools disseminated, differed according to what they thought the girl students should be made out into. Often parents and the larger family had contradictory views about the 'making' of these girls as in Chhobi's family in *Nobankur* or in Deboki's family in Sabitri Roy's *Paka Dhaner Gan.* While Chhobi's father is lukewarm about her education, her mother Momota is very keen that Chhobi gets a good education and improves her status in life. Momota imagines that Chhobi will make something worthwhile of her life by the dint of her education. Her parents-in-law are opposed to Chhobi's education and think it is rather a scandal for a girl from their family to venture out of the home. In the case of Deboki, her father, a teacher of the boys' *pathshala* in the village, is not opposed to Deboki going to another village to study but her mother is extremely opposed to her education, which she thinks is quite useless. It is her pressure that ensures her father brings back Deboki from school and gets her married. For the girls themselves they had different ideas about themselves, what they wanted to be and what they wanted from their lives.

Prioritising female education depended on the position of the family in the urban/rural, religion, class and caste axis. As mentioned earlier Indian Christian and Brahmo families encouraged their daughters to get some education. For the Christians it was the influence of the missionaries coupled with the fact that most of the families would be cut-off from their kith and kin and the agrarian base. Many of the Christians were low caste converts. Consequently they were not well off, could not fall back on income from landed or agricultural property and did not have highly paid jobs. So for such families it was necessary that the women worked and contributed to the family finances. The Brahmos had their internal arguments as to the purpose of female education and therefore to what extent girls should receive education. However, there was a general agreement that female education was necessary and many Brahmos went on to become educators. To understand the Brahmo attitude to female education, we must remember that Brahmoism was an elitist religious movement. To understand the precepts of Brahmoism and to participate in the religious practices, everyone needed to have some education. Thus female education was quite central to the survival of

Brahmoism itself, whose existence and propagation depended on an intellectual understanding of Brahmo philosophy.

Among middle class Hindus there were other factors that influenced the spread of female education. There was the urban/rural divide, but this must be seen in conjunction with class and caste affiliations. It was not simply that families in towns and cities were more progressive and sent their daughters to school as opposed to their counterparts in the villages. In fiction and in autobiographies we see the portrayal of a more complex picture. In the village society there was the material factor, i.e. the availability of schools. Often there would be a primary school for boys but none for girls. Since co-education was largely frowned upon, even enthusiastic parents were hesitant about sending girls to boys' schools. If the girls were sent to this school it was unlikely that they would be able to go to secondary schools which would be some distance away probably in the nearest towns. Then also the education of boys was always prioritised, as it was perceived that they would go on to become breadwinners. Therefore families in straitened circumstances opted to send sons to school rather than girls. Then there was also the economic status of the family. Girls from feudal families would find it more difficult to access education as such families prided themselves on the segregation and inaccessibility of their womenfolk. The strict notions of 'purity' meant that the girls found it difficult to break out of the private space of the *ondormohol.* However these same feudal families changed when they became urban residents. In their attempts to integrate with the colonial economy, they made changes to the rules of segregation and female education was no longer a taboo. Many of them would try to marry their daughter to civil servants and some of the sons of the family would also work for the colonial administration. Hence these families would be receptive to the idea of female education.

Families that came down the caste hierarchy, even if they were financially stable, did not see female education as important. On the other hand in higher caste families where men were educated and connected to education, usually there were efforts made to send daughters to school even if the parents were not well off. This effort was intensified in those rare households where the

mother was herself educated. It also appears that many reconstructive works undertaken by political activists and organisations helped the cause of female education and made education accessible for some girls in rural Bengal. In many conservative Hindu families where the men were educated, home education was also practised. In such cases though there was no formal education, family members tried to impart basic education to the girls of the family within the home, continuing the nineteenth century practice of *zenana* education.[89]

In urban areas where girls' schools were more easily accessible, some middle class families sent their daughters to school. It was a statement of their progressiveness. It was also calculated to ensure that the girls could be married to educated grooms, probably in the employment of the colonial government. However this was the case in the higher echelons of society. There were of course liberal and progressive families where female education was taken seriously and it was expected that girls would compete and prove their intellectual ability. More often than not these girls would go on to higher education and become professionals. However, as statistics show, such girls were few in number. In majority of families girls did not get the chance of formal education. If they were lucky, they had some family member teach them some elementary things, like alphabets and numbers. Partition brought about a change in attitude to female education across the board. Immediately after partition there was a fall in numbers of students on both sides of the border. Later as people struggled to cope with the effects of partition, female education was seen as useful both for the family and the state. Middle class women were expected to use this skill to look after their families and themselves, thereby reducing the burden on the state.

In the 1930s and 40s we see many women taking up a proactive role in female education and women like Sarala Devi Choudhurani, Lady Abala

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[89] See Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, pp. 36-39. Murshid says, 'The best educated women at this stage (1850s and 1860s) were the ones who had their education privately at home from either their husbands or, in some cases, from their parents.' Some girls from orthodox middle class families were sometimes taught by women missionaries as well. Also, Dagmer Engels, p.163-166.

Bose, Mrs Sarala Ray, Mataji Tapaswini, Hemlata Devi, Sister Nivedita, Lila Nag, Begum Rokeya among others were setting up schools in cities like Calcutta, Dhaka, Barisal. Their ideologies varied and the education offered also varied widely but the fact remains that they made education accessible to quite a few girls. There was also continual harping on educating girls in feminine subjects,[90] but all the discussion and debate notwithstanding, feminisation of female education did not quite happen. There were subjects like sewing, cooking and later Home Economics that were introduced in girls' curriculum but as schools became more standardised, affiliated to certain exam systems, subjects like arithmetic, history, geography, science featured in the syllabus of most well established schools. Mahakali Pathshala is a case in point. Girls were taught about rituals and cooking in the school, which included very little formal reading and writing but by 1947 when it was affiliated to Calcutta University the curriculum had been largely revised.[91]

All along the fear and reservations about female education continued to be expressed and efforts were made to keep women from pursuing subjects deemed cerebral and masculine. These reservations were couched in scientific terms. There were some new 'scientific discoveries' to prove that women's intellectual capabilities were not equal to that of men. Malavika Karlekar writes

> From the second half of the nineteenth century there were scientific corroboration for arguments on differences in natures, and consequently in destinies. Studies in Europe and Britain had added a new dimension to debates on sex-related characteristics. In the 1870s it was believed that intellectual functions were located in the frontal lobes of the brain, and as men's lobes were larger, they were naturally intellectually superior. However, by the end of the century, the intellect was thought to be located in parietal lobes, which were again more pronounced in men. (In their 'Sex Differences and Cognitive Abilities: A Sterile Field of Enquiry?' Dorothy Griffiths and Esther Saraga give a competent overview of these scientific

[90] Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, pp.44-5.
[91] Geraldine Forbes, p. 50.

> trends. Their essay appears in Conagh Hartnett et al's *Sex –role Stereotyping*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1979).[92]

In India these ideas were taken over and even as late as 1948 we have a book by one Jagannath Majumdar that says,

> The modern civilisation demands suppression of inborn tendencies, and rejects anatomical and physiological differences. A modern girl, therefore, ventures to take part in activities suited for the opposite sex ...But she forgets that it is impossible to override nature, and in the long run she must pay penalty for her rash adventure. The statistics of the health of college-going girls show that the academic career under the present system is not at all suitable for them and it deprives them of many of the things that create sweetness in woman-life ... The strain caused by persistent mental activity in higher education, on adolescent women arrests the proper development of hips, mammary glands and internal generative organs.[93]

Hence, it was argued that it was inadvisable for girls to follow the curriculum set up for boys in view of their diminished intellectual capability and the detrimental effect the stress of higher education on their sexual functioning. So a 'feminised' education was recommended for them.

The appropriate mode of imparting education also evoked lot of discussions. As education would ultimately require the opening up of at least a section of the public space to women it stirred up anxieties about female sexuality. Unsupervised female sexuality was dangerous to the peace and stability of society and hitherto, through the practice of *porda,* female sexuality had been regulated and curbed.[94] In spite of patriarchal strictures, education jeopardised the practice of *porda* but the practice of marrying girls early persisted well into the 1940s. There was also the fear of the destabilising

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[92] Malavika Karlekar, *The Slow Transition from Womanhood to Personhood: Can Education Help?,* Occasional Paper no. 16 (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1989) p. 15.

[93] Jagannath Majumdar, *Thoughts on Female Education in India* (Calcutta: N.M. Ray Chowdhury & Co. Ltd., 1951), p. 42. Majumdar says that in women the thyroid glands are heavier which results in their mild temperament. Also 'there is a heavier drain of circulating calcium in blood of women. This heavier drain has also made women weaker in body and mind than men. It has also made them timid and shy.' (p. 38).

[94] See an instance of this in Muhammad Shamsul Alam, *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: Jibon O Sahityokormo* (Dhaka: Bangla Akademi, 1989), p.124.

influence of non-familial relationships that girls might form in educational institutions.

The anxieties and question remained in the twentieth century, eighty years after Bethune started his school with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar as the Secretary. For educators, parents and girls the aim of female education continued to be a matter of discussion and debate. Interesting questions are: How did the rapidly changing socio-political situation influence this debate on female education? What was the attitude of the family towards female education and how did this attitude change according to rural/urban divide, class, educational level of the parents, the historical time? What did women feel about education and did their feelings/perception change over these twenty-five years, 1930-1955? What role did women play in educating themselves, or their daughters or other female relations? What did they hope to achieve and what did they achieve? Did education significantly affect the lives of women or how important was it? What was the impact of partition on female education in Bengal? Some of these issues will be explored in the discussions of the novels.

The idea that the primary role of women was that of a wife and a mother remained powerful in the twentieth century. However, while in the nineteenth century many highly educated women, like one of the first female doctors in Bengal Virginia Mary Mitter and the poet and lecturer Kamini Sen, gave up their professions on marrying,[95] in the twentieth century there were a few women like Faziltunnesa, who started imagining other roles for themselves, thereby giving shape to the patriarchal anxieties about radical changes in the private sphere of the home.[96] With the intensification of the political struggle women were inspired to imagine many other roles for themselves and either they combined their political activities with their familial duties or they decided to forgo marriage and motherhood and committed themselves to other roles. If education enabled women to move physically into the public space, it also

[95] Ghulam Murshid, *Rassundori Theke Rokeya: Nari Progotir Eksho Bochhor* (Dhaka, Bangla Akademi, 1993), p.125.
[96] Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmick (eds), *Zanana Mohfil: Bangali Musolman Lekhikader Nirbachito Rochona, 1904-1938* (Calcutta: Stree, 1998), pp.159-161.

enabled them to create history or 'her story'. Women started writing, inscribing their stories that had not been told so far. Women – as Virginia Woolf remarked – have an overwhelming presence in literature and almost none in history.[97] Women have been the muses of many a poem but their existence has all but been erased from history. To redress the gross imbalance in representation in history women have had to wield the pen themselves to insinuate themselves into history as it were. In the case of Bengal we find that one of the fallouts of female education had been the outpouring of writings by the newly literate women. It was an act of becoming the subject of history. Female education in Bengal literally created 'her story'.

Mothering the daughter's education

Documentary evidence indicates that in the nineteenth century educated husbands mainly took the initiative in getting their child wives educated. We read of many romantic instances in the nineteenth century, where husbands taught their child wives late at night, to escape the censure of the elders and in the process formed an affectionate, companionate relationship.[98] In the twentieth century mothers appeared to be taking the initiative for their daughter's education.[99] As educated women became mothers of daughters they tried to ensure that their daughters received some education and often it was their influence that was finally responsible for the girl going to school. Though it may seem that a daughter's education would depend on the whims and attitude of the patriarch of the family towards female education, works of fiction and autobiographical writings both seem to indicate that mothers played a vital role in ensuring the education of their girls. The mothers seemed to think that their daughters had a right to education that they needed

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[97] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), p.41.

[98] Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women,* pp122-149. Karlekar talks about the education that Kailashbashini received. In *Reluctant Debutante* Ghulam Murshid provides a list of some women in the early days of *zenana* education who were educated privately by their husbands like Kumudini (1840?- 1865), Nistarini Debi (1840-1860), Brahmomayi (1845-76), Manorama Majumdar (1848-1936), Jnada Debi (1852-1941), Rajkumari Banerji (1852-76), and Saudamini Debi (?-1874). In all these cases the husbands were Brahmo. See *Reluctant Debutante*, p.39.

[99] *Ibid*, p.1. Lilabati Mitra, the daughter of social reformer Raj Narayan Basu had one regret that lack of extensive schooling meant that she could not express all the elevate thoughts and feelings that she had. Thus she ensured that her daughters were not similarly deprived and sent them to College.

to ensure and establish. While they did not envisage female education as leading to economic independence, they regarded knowledge as invaluable toward improving the status of women in society. They connected the low esteem accorded to women in society to the ignorance of women. Quite frequently the daughters did indeed take advantage of the education they had received to live different kinds of lives with more resources to realise their aspirations. Brahmomoyi's two daughters, Lady Abola Bose and Mrs Sarala Das, not only carved a niche for themselves but also made significant contributions toward female education in particular and women's issues in general.

Of the novels that I will be analysing here, the mothers certainly play an important role in the education of their daughters in *Subornolota* and *Nobankur.* In *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* Sutara has been orphaned and in the absence of her parents, the society ensures that she gets an education. Why do her brothers and the society take this initiative will be probed and discussed later.

The first work that I will look at is *Subornolota* because it is situated earliest in the historical time frame. In her comments about her fictional works Ashapurna has claimed that her writing is not autobiographical.[100] Yet there are some similarities with her own life, particularly with regard to education that are interesting. We recall the importance that Sotyoboti attaches to education and Subornolota's attempts to educate the children of the household, particularly the girls. Ashapurna did not receive any formal schooling. While her mother was literate and her father was a fairly well known illustrator, the family did not believe in the education of girls. So little Ashapurna, like Sotyoboti in *Prothom Protishruti,* just watched the boys reading or practising their writing and memorised that. Consequently she learnt to read the letters upside down! As a young girl she started writing for children and unlike her protagonist Subornolota, but like Bokul, she had considerable success in her writing career. Thus, in Ashapurna's own life

[100] Ashapurna Devi, *Ar Ek Ashapurna* (Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, 1997), p. 13-19.

acquiring an education had been difficult. However, it must also be taken into account that Ashapurna was born in the first decade of the twentieth century and Sotyoboti is also from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when literacy rate for females was less than 1%. Hence, it is interesting that the first two books of the trilogy dwell so strongly on the issue of female education. Subornolota's education is not complete when her father and grandmother marry her off but whatever she has acquired remains with her and she tries her best to pass that on. To both Sotyoboti and Subornolota, education signifies knowledge and enlightenment. Subornolota despises the term *meyemanush* or *meyechele* that is used to refer to women as she aspires to humanhood rather than just be regarded as female. She feels the label *meyemanush* demeans her as it does the rest of womankind. The narrator writes about Subornolota's husband Probodh's thoughts about women:

> *Meyemanush* habitually gossip, squabble with each other, spank kids, cook rice, and sitting on folded knees gobble a pot full of rice with a large helping of *chorchodi.* This is usual, known. (p. 154)

Probodh's younger brother quips, '*Meyechele* are trouble' (p. 190). When Subornolota's husband finds her talking to Ombika he calls her *behaya meyemanush* (meaning shameless hussy) (p.245). This is the way the men and the women of the household think about womankind in general. The term itself seems to be the indicator of a barbaric, sub-human, uncivilised state of existence and Subornolota feels that by denying education society has denied women the chance to evolve into better beings. Subornolota in her actions rebels against this categorisation of women, trying to treat everyone as a human being. However, the women of the household accept the *meyemanush* tag and the degraded level of existence it entails. They lack the courage to dream far less to demand a better existence. Subornolota tells Ombika when her husband humiliates her before him:

> 'Ombika Thakurpo, all your dreams of rescuing the country is a lie. First try to cure the country of its maladies. ... Till you are able to deliver this *meyemanush* race from the well of humiliation, all your efforts will be akin to pouring ghee into the ashes.' (p.245)

For Subornolota education does not merely mean learning about the different subjects but it also means enhancing the faculty of understanding, social consciousness and ethics. Whether education as was offered in schools could actually give rise to better human beings is another matter. This is Sotyoboti and Subornolota's perception of ideal education. It could be said that for them education is the only hope that will lead them and other women out of the degraded state of their current existence. Hence, they express their intense desire to educate themselves and to ensure that the next generation of women too are educated. Sotyoboti teaches in the afternoons when she lives in Calcutta and when she goes to Kashi, she sets up a school for girls. Subornolota is housebound but she gets together the children of the household and tries to teach them. For both Sotyoboti and Subornolota teaching assumes an urgency and importance because the lessons they have learned from their life must be imparted. If they are able to absorb these lessons, the daughters can avoid spending a lifetime making the same mistakes and learning the same lessons. This education is value-based aimed at creating a better human being. However formal education is also very important for Sotyoboti and Subornolota as it exposes the girls to the rigours of the various disciplines. The piecemeal education offered at home by the mothers can never compare with what trained teachers teach at schools. It is also one way that girls can prove their intellectual capabilities. Her sons and other relations tell Subornolota about the success of some girls in winning scholarships and degrees. They give these examples to compare and belittle Bokul, who Subornolota was desperately trying to educate. What is apparent here is the competitive spirit that some of the girls and their guardians had. Subornolota engages a private tutor for Bokul, trying to establish that Bokul is no less intelligent than anyone else. It is also perhaps Subornolota's way of trying to prove her own capability through her daughter, what Subornolota could have become if she had the opportunity.

Like Rassundori Devi[101] in mid-nineteenth century Bengal, Ashapurna and her protagonist Sotyoboti of *Prothom Protishruti* are *jitakkhora* (self taught) having overcome all obstacles and taught themselves. Rassundori was a rather quiet child who was often bullied by her playmates. So she was sent to the *pathshala* to sit by the side of the boys instead of the playground. It was here that she learnt the letters by observing the boys read and write. As she could not put pen to paper she could not learn how to write. She was married off as a child. As a young adult with a distinctly religious bent of mind she longed to read religious texts. Henceforth, it is a fascinating story about the industry of this remarkable rural housewife. Similarly Sotyoboti also learns by observing and improvises pen and paper to be able to write. Not only does Sotyoboti learn to write the letters, her horrified mother discovers her writing poetry. It is a religious verse that Sotyoboti has composed. Before her mother's discovery, however, the entire village is scandalised beyond belief when Sotyoboti leads a pack of village kids chanting a verse that she has composed, ridiculing a man who could only express his manliness by beating his wife. Knowledge for Sotytoboti, even as a little girl, is a vehicle of truth, no matter how harsh and unpalatable. Sotyoboti's verses show the dual uses of education, at least in Sotyoboti's own life. When she writes the verse in honour of the mother goddess, she puts her knowledge to creating something beautiful, invoking a sense of reverence and spiritual upliftment. When she writes her satire about the masculinity of the wife-beating man, she uses her knowledge for social correction. These efforts illustrate also the twin impulses in Sotyoboti's character, the warrior engaged in the destruction of a world gone wrong and a loving, creative spirit engaged in the construction of a humane and better world.

Much later, when Subornolota is born after Sotyoboti has given birth to two sons, Sotyoboti determines that her daughter shall have a proper education like her sons. Sotyoboti firmly believes that girls should have access to all fields of knowledge and they have the right to evolve into enlightened and civilised human beings. She also assumes a maternal role in the life of

[101] Rassundori Devi, *Amar Jibon*, the first autobiography in Bengali, pp.28-31, cited in Karlekar, *Voices from Within,* pp.117-118.

another girl Suhasini, and Sotyoboti ensures that Suhasini receives the education that she would like her own daughter to receive. Suhasini fulfils Sotyoboti's dream and not only does she eagerly receive the education but she also makes use of it in her capacity as a teacher. As Sotyoboti learns later, Suhasini teaches the senior students at the school Subornolota attends. Suhasini had the odds stacked against her as she was an illegitimate child of a young widow. Her mother Shonkori realised that her daughter did not have much chance in the world. So she passed off the little girl as a child-widow to save her from the lustful gaze of exploitative men. When Shonkori suddenly met Sotyoboti, who was a relation, she entrusted Suhasini to Sotyoboti's care and commited suicide, confident in the knowledge that Sotyoboti will look after her daughter. Sotyoboti fought society and her own family to enable Suhasini to carve out a life of dignity for herself. Suhasini had to fight her own battles but Sotyoboti made sure that she was equipped to do so. Suhasini was Sotyoboti's pride but with her own daughter Soytoboti is dealt a heavy blow. It is much later that Subornolota becomes aware of the dreams that Sotyoboti had dreamt for her through the letter that Sotyoboti wrote to her before she died at Kashi, dreams that Subornolota's marriage had destroyed. She dreams those same dreams for her daughters who, like the young Subornolota, cannot understand their mother's visions.

More often than not the relations between mothers and daughters in the trilogy are tense and seem to crumble in the face of patriarchal machinations. Mothers try to reach out to the daughters to make it possible for them to live a life of dignity but the daughters turn away in incomprehension. The mothers fight against all odds to secure a life of dignity for their daughters. These women know that society will not grant them what they want. However, the daughters grow up battle-weary. They do not understand that even when their mothers are stern, they are not against them but waging war for them. The family itself conspires against the mothers and teaches daughters to regard the mother as a foe rather than a friend. As Subornolota's eldest daughter says to herself, 'she will never be like her mother. Her mother is so aggressive! All the other aunts are far better' (210). It seems Subornolota's two elder daughters, like the young Subornolota herself, are reluctant to tread

the path that promises hardship more than anything else. They see the price that Sotyoboti paid, that Subornolota was paying for unknown, uncertain objectives and the daughters choose the easier option of conformity to the socially prescribed feminine roles. On the other hand, someone like Suhasini had experienced the helplessness of women through the life of her mother Shonkori and had felt how society exploited and humiliated such women. Hence, the only way out was to earn a position of strength where one could command respect. When Sotyoboti made it possible for Suhasini to educate herself, Suhasini recognised the opportunity for what it was. Her education enabled her to break free of the cycle of degradation that had ended her mother's life. When mothers are weak, daughters recognise the need to be strong and when mothers are strong, daughters seem to be apprehensive of the strength of the mother's will. Education in these novels is not simply about learning. It denotes a way of life and living, quite different from the life and living that women had been used to. For women pushed to the brink, any other option was to be grasped at – it could not be worse. For others who had accepted what the society and life offered them, hankering after education and all that it signified seemed like a mirage, which also entailed the loss of a known world. It was a bewildering and frightening prospect. Sotyoboti and Subornolota had the courage of explorers of new worlds. The other women did not have their mettle. They were not willing to exchange the old world for a 'new world yet to be born'. In a way the prospects that female education offered were also its bane. It was imagined as such a life-changing experience that it deterred the timid women as it raised the hackles of the patriarchy. It is in *Bokulkotha* that we realise that education per se is not radical though it certainly has the potential to improve lives. It is possible, however, to make radical use of education and some women indeed did that. This realisation that female education was not intrinsically subversive or 'disruptive' probably led to the waning of the opposition to female education later on in the twentieth century, though indifference to it remained ingrained in many sections of society.

Subornolota feels it is a utopia when she comes to her sister-in-law's village and finds her nieces attending the village school. The house is empty and

Subola tells her that all the children including the girls are at the *pathshala.* She learns that Ombika, who is a nationalist, had taken it upon himself to eradicate illiteracy from the village. Ombika had gone around begging parents to sent girls to the girls' *pathshala.* As his kin Omulyo and Subola had to be the first to encourage Ombika's efforts and send their daughters to his school. Subornolota is overwhelmed to find someone working hard to realise what had been Sotyoboti's dream and what was her deepest aspiration. Subornolota thinks of Subola's village as *'Onyo Bhubon'* or another world. Through this phrase the idealistic and potentially fragile world of this village is framed. Subornolota is enthused by Ombika's efforts and is also sympathetic to his efforts as she has tried to do the same within her own family. The failure of her efforts puts Ombika's literacy mission in perspective. There is the understanding of how difficult a task Ombika has taken upon himself and also the conviction that it is those people who dream utopian dreams who are able to change the world. Subornolota tells Omulyo, 'All the great deeds in the world are done by crazy people' (p. 219).

Sulekha Sanyal's Chhobi in *Nobankur* grows up in a decaying rural feudal family during the 1930 and 40s. She goes to live with her eldest *pishi* (father's sister) Sukumari when she is about ten and returns back to the village when the town she was living in is bombed. She lived with Sukumari for approximately four years and studied in Kumudini High School. As eastern Bengal is the locale for Chhobi's story, we can assume that she returned to her ancestral village home in Kusumpur around 1944 when Chittagong was bombed. In terms of historical time, *Nobankur* probably begins a few years after *Subornolota,* approximately around 1930 and continues till about 1945 or 1946. Also in terms of locale, while Ashapurna's novel is based in Calcutta with only one excursion that Subornolota makes to her sister-in-law's village, Chhobi's Kusumpur is a village in east Bengal, now Bangladesh. Her family is a feudal family, unlike Subornolota's in-laws, but they are as conservative and concerned with the 'honour' of the family, which is, unsurprisingly, to a large extent dependent on the conduct of the women of the family. The education of girls is also not encouraged here though it is not opposed actively when Momota arranges for Chhobi to go to the *pathshala* (elementary village

school). It appears that it was not unusual for middle class parents to send their daughters to the village school for a few years till they were married off. It might be that parents thought that if the groom was well educated and urban bred, it would be to the girl's advantage if she knew how to read and write along with other accomplishments like being able to sing a devotional song or two. Sephu, Chhobi's cousin does not go to school but her mother asks Chhobi to teach her some songs so that she can sing something when prospective grooms' people began scouting for a bride. We can detect here a slight change in attitude towards music in Bengali society. As a young bride Momota was told by her father-in-law that women in respectable families did not sing and now in the same family singing is considered to be an asset to woo prospective grooms. The female education scenario in Chhobi's village is placed in perspective when we see that most little girls barely spent a couple of years at these schools. The Hartog Committee of 1929 points out that out of the total enrolment in Class 1 only a pitiable 2% of girls reached Class 6 in Bengal. *Towards Equality*, a report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974), shows that for 1950-51 in the primary stage 55% of boys had enrolled to 20.1% girls. In the middle stage the figure for girls drops to 4.6%. For the years 1955-56 the figures at the primary stage for girls is 25% while at the middle stage it is 6.9%.[102] These figures make it clear that firstly, the percentage of girls attending school after Indian independence continued to be quite dismal, and subsequent to that there was a high rate of attrition. Consequently in the few years that they spent in the school the girls barely picked up the letters and often their composition skills were quite inadequately developed. Early marriage and an indifferent attitude to education in the marital home would ensure that they would forget all that they had learnt before long, which experts term as loss of literacy.

Nobankur shows most of Chhobi's female classmates whiling their time in the school before their parents arrange their marriages. So they do not really apply themselves to acquiring an education, as they regard their time in

[102] *Towards Equality,* a report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (New Delhi: Government of India Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974), p. 237.

school as an intermediate stage between childhood and 'wifehood'. For Chhobi, Momota calls the *Ponditmoshai* (teacher at the *pathshala*) and asks him to teach all that he knows to her daughter. The overwhelmed teacher, Kali *Pondit,* remembers Momota sending for him and saying:

> 'Brother, you know that my son's education will be taken care of by his father and uncles. But Chhobi's education will begin and end in the school. So, please do me a favour, will you? Teach her all you can, for as long as possible. For the rest, let her destiny decide.' (p. 29)

Kali had replied that of course he would. 'A girl who has such a worthy mother must be very fortunate.' Momota had then said, 'By good fortune you mean marriage, don't you? But that is the fate of every woman!' (p.29). Kali Pondit could not imagine what alternative fate Momota had in mind for Chhobi. Maybe Momota did not know either but as he leaves the house Purnoshoshi, Chhobi's grandmother, accosts him. She knows quite well what Chhobi's future will be:

> 'The mother wants to make a judge or magistrate out of her daughter. Almost ten already; I doubt the old man will allow her to go to school much longer. What will she do with her education once she gets married and goes to live with her in-laws? She will hardly have any time for herself after cooking and looking after the children. That's the destiny of a woman.' (p. 30)

Quite evidently Momota wants to fight this destiny for her daughter through whatever little resource that she has. In her love and grief for Chhobi, Momota also expresses her love for the little girl that she herself was. Often when Momota looks at Chhobi she visualises that young girl that she was, talented and beautiful. When she hands over Chhobi to Sukumari she tells Sukumari, 'Chhobi really is the picture of me as I was once' (p.62). However, Momota does not want Chhobi to be as Momota is; what Chhobi would be is different. Like Chhobi Momota had education but that did not change her life. Perhaps it would be considered that she had made a good marriage in a good '*obhijat*' (upper class) family. It is unlikely that her in-laws had any use for her

education and her musical abilities. So of what use had Momota's education been and if it had not really changed her life why is she so eager for Chhobi to get education? Though her education had not got her very far, Momota evidently considers education to be enabling. Through Chhobi she is trying to rewrite the story of her own life once again. Her education gives her dreams and daring. In her own life she conforms to the expectations of the family but when it comes to her daughter she dreams that Chhobi will have a better life and dares to get her educated. Momota did not have a mother and as an orphan depended on the generosity of others. Apart from having a mother, Chhobi has an added advantage that Momota lacked. Chhobi is fearless. This fearlessness may well be one of Momota's gifts to Chhobi. Sukumari remembers the newly wed Momota as a gentle, frightened girl. Prodip, Chhobi's elder brother is also a gentle person. Chhobi amply compensates for the gentleness of her mother and brother with her spirit and strength of character. Momota's intense loving support is the prop that bolsters Chhobi every time she protests against injustices and demands her rights as a human being. Even when Momota scolds and beats up Chhobi out of her frustration, Chhobi knows that Momota loves and supports her. In her silence and anger also her mother is Chhobi's ally and that contributes to Chhobi's grit and courage.

The patriarchs of the family, her grandfather and father, while not overly pleased do not object to Chhobi attending the *pathshala* as they imagine she will be there for a little while and will be married before long. However, another maternal figure steps in at this moment, Chhobi's *pishi* Sukumari, who is married to a wealthy man, lives in the town and is childless. Childless Sukumari wants to bring up Chhobi as her daughter and Momota agrees even though it breaks her heart to send Chhobi away. Sukumari's proposal leads Momota to hope that Chhobi will be able to pursue her education after all. For Sukumari, who unlike Momota is uneducated, Chhobi is a precious girl who must be given all the resources that her mothers and aunts can possibly get for her so that in her life Chhobi does not experience the humiliations that her mothers and aunts have experienced. Sukumari was witness to the death of the young Momota's aspiration when she became a wife and a daughter-in-

law. In her own life Sukumari had to live with the humiliation of her husband's extramarital affair as she had no other options open to her, and she understands the mute pain of her sister Binti when she is married to a much older widower with two children. As she tells Chhobi:

> 'I had built so many dreams around you. I thought we'd have an educated girl in our family. I had wanted to see if all that learning could help her avoid the fate of women such as Binti and me.' (p.148).

While in Ashapurna Devi's trilogy the women like Muktokeshi, Chãpa and Chondon are opposed to female education, in *Nobankur* the women, except for the grandmother Purnoshoshi, pool all that they have to ensure Chhobi's education. Momota and Sukumari and the teacher Sudha make possible Chhobi's educational journey. Others like aunt Soroswoti cannot do anything for Chhobi but show their appreciation for her by asking her to be the first one to touch Soroswoti's new born daughter and wishing that the daughter grows up to be as spirited as Chhobi. As Momota and Sukumari might have expected, the family cannot but agree to the wealthy, married daughter's proposal and Chhobi leaves with Sukumari. This journey exposes Chhobi to a larger world and a spectrum of people she had never known in the village. So Chhobi acquires knowledge in more ways than one and becomes conscious of the fate of girls from poverty-stricken families, like Nilu and Pilu and Poribanu. Nilu and Poribanu, striving to live amidst abject poverty disappear without a trace and when she comes to the village Chhobi also encounters young widows like Durga living the life of the dead. Despite Sukumari's objections Chhobi fraternises with these girls belonging to different class, religion and language. As human beings they are, she discovers, the same in their struggle to get the things that redeem their life and make it more bearable. Poribanu, a Kashmiri Muslim who loves the Bengali language must contend with her mother's illness and abject poverty to educate herself, while Nilu and Pilu struggle against hunger and deprivation to keep body and soul together. Chhobi's education has taken her a step further than Sukumari could have imagined. Women like Sukumari have been kept apart from each other through patriarchal stratagems like segregation, ritual purity, caste

distinctions among others. Chhobi breaks free of these and gradually learns to identify with the struggles of these girls.

Chobi's educational journey is also indebted to another maternal figure, Sudha, a teacher in the school that Chhobi attends. Sudha introduces Chhobi to a life beyond the printed letters and Chhobi becomes aware of the political struggle for the freedom of the nation. Sudha encourages Chhobi to look beyond her individual life and extends the perimeter of her concerns and understanding. It is another important step in Chhobi's growth. After Sudha is arrested and goes to prison, and Chhobi has to move to the village because of the threat of the air raids, Chhobi is left virtually on her own. There is encouragement from the dying Odhirka and from her own uncle Sukhoda and friend Tomal, but it is Chhobi's own grit and determination that sees her through this period. However, after she passes the Matriculation examination, it is again her mother Momota's support and planning that helps Chhobi to resist the efforts to get her married and enables her to go to Calcutta to study further. For Deboki in Sabitri Ray's *Paka Dhaner Gan,* her illiterate mother's lack of support ensures that she cannot continue her education even when her schoolteacher father gets her admitted to a school, and she is married early. An unsympathetic marital home means that there is no possibility of her continuing her education and the most she can do is engage in clandestine reading. When these reading materials are discovered her husband commits them to the fire:

> Today also Deboki is startled at the sudden shadow that looms large across the walls of the room. She turns back to see Rajen standing – in his hands her book *Cholar Pothe* [On the Way]. Deboki in a requesting tone says, 'Return the book to me. I will send it to Sathi. I will not keep it here.'
> 'Returning it.' In a grave voice Rajen taunts her. 'Take it.' He thrusts the book into the burning stove. (p. 83)

For girls, once they were married, the support of their husbands was quite crucial in determining if they could pursue a formal or informal education. As Ashapurna shows in the case of Subornolota, not only does marriage stop any further education, Subornolota's husband resents her reading books also.

The state of schools in Bengal left much to be desired, particularly schools in *mofussils* and in rural areas. Lakshmi Misra points out that of the total institutions for girls in British India, more than half were in Bengal, but many of them were inefficient. According to the statistics available, between 1921 and 1937, institutions in Bengal increased by 43.2%.[103] Due to the prejudice against co-education there arose many one-teacher schools, which were of a poor standard and badly equipped. Consequently the students in these schools barely became literate if at all. In *Nobankur* Sulekha Sanyal draws a graphic and humorous portrait of a one-teacher village school. Chhobi goes to the sole *pathshala* that is there for the boys and girls of the village. The *ponditmoshai* of the *pathshala* doubles as the postmaster of the village post office as the salary of eight rupees that he receives as the teacher of the school is not sufficient for him to run his family. He carries out both his duties simultaneously and the children wait while he carries out his postmaster's duties. Sometimes the exhausted *ponditmoshai* sleeps during class and his students take advantage of their somnolent teacher to create a ruckus and play pranks on each other:

> After the tables, it was time for the handwriting class. This was when Kali *Pondit* would take a nap, while the children filled two pages with handwriting. He would take a dose of snuff and lightly rest his head on the back of the chair; gradually his head would loll and slide off, and Kali *Pondit* would start to snore. The children would take the opportunity to chat, and soon their chattering would grow to a roar. Louder and louder they'd clamour, until they could be heard from quite a distance, and only then would *Ponditmoshai* wake up with a start and yell at them; then all would be quiet again. (p. 27)

The dispersal of knowledge is quite casual and studying by rote is encouraged. As a result we find that there is very little quality education for the girls, and not much either for the boys from very poor families, who did not benefit much from the year or two that they spent at the school. Almost all the girls left school after about a year or two while the boys from well-off families went to district or town high schools to continue their education. The

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[103] Lakshmi Misra, *Education of Women in India, 1921-1966*, p.58.

representation of Chhobi's *pathshala* indicates the material deprivation affecting female education coupled with social indifference and apathy. Momota was an exception in her eagerness to make available to her daughter as much education as she could.

At the same time the representation of urban schools suggest that there was a wide chasm between urban and rural area in the approach to education. In Sabitri Ray's novels also there appears to be dire paucity of educational opportunities for rural girls and a crippling lack of concern while in cities like Calcutta the schools are better provided and the teachers more dynamic and involved. The school that Chhobi goes to in the town is evidently well run. This school also receives some financial assistance from the government. Thus, when it is known that Sudha, a teacher of the school is involved in anti-imperialist agitations she loses her job. The headmistress also keeps the school open when there is a strike in the town against the colonial government. For all the discourse about 'feminised' education, the girls in Kumudini High seem to be reading towards the matriculation examination and there is no indication about the school following any feminised course of study. When Chhobi goes back to the village and prepares for the matriculation examination virtually on her own it is hard work but she is not under-prepared by the syllabus she had followed at Kumudini High. The school in Calcutta that Bhodra of Sabitri Ray's *Paka Dhaner Gan* teaches in seems to be quite a dynamic school where girls are not only encouraged to read texts but also participate in singing and dancing. This was an aspect of female education that was largely introduced by Rabindranath Tagore through his experimentations at his school in Santiniketan.[104] For a long time music and dance had been associated with 'public' women, hence was considered disreputable. When the female students at the noble laureate's school not only started singing his compositions but also started performing at various programmes on public stage, music and dance no longer remained a taboo

[104] Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal, 1890-1930*, pp.178-179. Engels says that the first female student to do a public dance performance on stage was a teenager Gouri Bhanja, who performed in a solo role in the drama *Notir Pujo*. Tagore took a role in the play to make Gouri's performance more acceptable and to ensure that her reputation was not sullied and marriage prospects were not harmed.

for Bengali girls and instead began to be considered as an accomplishment. For future generations of Bengali girls another avenue for expression was discovered. Tagore's promotion of music and dancing among his female students also made it possible for some girls to take up singing and dancing as a respectable profession. However, it must also be said that while many girls were taught singing and dancing, performing on public stage and adopting it as a profession remained limited to a few till about the 1970s. Thus, music and dance, though not traditionally subjects of study at schools slowly became acceptable as one and became a liberating option for some women.

The reality of early marriages, though, remained a deterrent toward the advancement of education of girls even though the age of marriage did continue to rise gradually over the years. In its report for the period 1917-1919, the Calcutta University Commission says that while the age of marriage of girls in educated Hindu families was increasing slowly it was still too low for a girl to have a good education before marriage.[105] The average age of marriage for girls in 1941-51 was 15.4 years. In the *pathshala* of the 1930s that Chhobi attends there are five female students including Chhobi. During the first few pages, where we read about Chhobi attending the school, we learn that these girls would not come to school much longer as they had grown-up now. Presumably they would get married soon. Later when she is widowed, Durga, one of Chhobi's former classmates, realises that her lack of education means that she has no way out of a traumatic life. In the town school that Chhobi attends, early marriage, though not widespread, is present as well. There is a mention of girls from senior classes getting married and terminating their study at school. There are also instances of girls getting married and coming back to school after a few days. In her autobiography Usharani Mukhopadhyay[106] describes how she got married before she could appear for the Matriculation examination. While marriage did schedule some changes in her life, she could however continue to attend school and she

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[105] Calcutta University Commission Report, 1917-1919, MSS.Eur.F341/68 (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1919).
[106] Usharani Mukhopadhyay, *Sei Je Amar Nana Ronger Dinguli* (Calcutta: Pustaka Bipani, 1987).

went to Dhaka's Eden School after her marriage. However, her ardent desire to matriculate could not be realised for many years as she became pregnant with her first child. It was after many years as a mother of three children that she could resume her studies. Usharani's was probably an unusual case as there would be very few women who would have the opportunity to resume their studies with the help and encouragement of supportive husbands.

Impact of Partition

It has been noted that there were a lot of debates about the kind of education that was appropriate for girls. It was often suggested that certain cerebral subjects were not suitable for girls. In the Report of the University Education Commission, 1948-49, which was chaired by Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, it was stated that while men and women's abilities were approximately equal, it did not follow that men's and women's education should be identical. The Report recommended that a woman's education should include practical 'laboratory' experience in the care of a home and a family:

> Her education as a woman should include practical 'laboratory' experience in the care of a home and family. Equipment for a girl's education might well include:
> 1) A baby home
> 2) A nursery school, which incidentally would relieve nearby mothers during a part of the day
> 3) A club for school children and adolescents
> 4) A little home for convalescents
> 5) A small home for old people
> 6) A home setting where students may have experience in home maintenance and operation, and where they may act as hostesses.

The Report was also of the opinion that the theory of equality of opportunity need not necessarily be translated to identity of opportunity.[107] If we look at some other government reports from this period it becomes apparent that the attitude towards female education differed even among government agencies. The *First Five Year Plan* says:

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[107] *The Report of the University Education Commission, 1948-49* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1950), Vol. 1, p.383, cited in Misra, *Education of Women in India, 1921-1966,* pp.132-133.

> The general purpose and objective of women's education cannot, of course be different from the purpose and objective of men's education ... At the secondary and even at the university stage women's education should have a vocational or occupational bias.[108]

The tenor of these two documents must be read in the historical context. Both these reports were written in the post-partition era. While the Radhakrishnan Report might hark back to the image of the wife and mother whose true place was in the bosom of the family and whose primary duty was looking after the family, the state, whose resources were stretched while taking care of refugees, would be keen to ensure that women's education had an occupational bias. So it does not come as a surprise that *The First Five Year Plan* imagines an education that will enable women to earn a livelihood and relieve the state of the responsibility of looking after them and their families. Immediately after partition, the figures for female education dropped significantly both in terms of the number of institutions for girls and the number of female students in Bengal and Punjab,[109] but the acceptance of female education became much easier. Particularly for the displaced families the issue of survival assumed precedence over everything else. Post-partition there were many families that lost their male earning member or the men found it difficult to adjust to the new country and find the kind of jobs that they did earlier. In such families it was the women who had to come forward to use whatever skills they had and look after the rest of the family. If they had education, middle class women could get 'respectable' jobs in offices and factories. Then there were women who were abducted and/or raped and then 'rescued' by the state. The research of Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin show that communities and families abandoned such women, as they were regarded as polluted, particularly in the Hindu community.[110] While the state

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[108] *Towards Equality*, p.235.

[109] Misra, *Education of Women in India, 1921-1966,* pp.123-126.

[110] Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1998). The Indian nation launched a recovery mission to bring back to India Hindu women who had been abducted. This soon became a problem, as their families were not willing to take such women back. Nehru and Gandhi pleaded with the people to accept these women into the fold of the family. Gandhi said, 'That woman is as pure as the

perception of female education took in the necessities of the time, it is likely that for women left to fend for themselves and within families that were grappling with the terrible fallout of the partition, ideas about the necessity of female education and its end purpose were changing. In recent publications on partition history, the oral testimonies of women's experience of partition in Punjab and Bengal illustrate how crucial female education had become to the survival of the women and their families.[111] In her novel about partition *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, Jyotirmoyee Devi takes a slightly different approach to the issue of education of an orphaned refugee girl.

Sutara is a young girl growing up in a village in the Noakhali region of east Bengal. Her father is a schoolteacher and she is preparing the Matriculation exam when the village is gripped by communal violence. As Sutara tells Amulya Babu, her brother's father-in-law, it was a school attended by both Hindu and Muslim girls. Her father was one of the teachers and Tamijuddin Saheb, who sheltered her, was the Principal of the school. Among her classmates, there were four Hindu and three Muslim girls who were going to appear for the Matriculation examination. Amulya Babu comments that people must have been quite enthusiastic about education in her village, implying that the numbers given by Sutara were quite unusual for a village school. However, it is this enthusiasm for education that helps the family out of an awkward situation. Sutara is a problem for her brother and his in-laws that they are hard pressed to solve when she arrives, almost unbidden, to Calcutta with Tamijuddin Saheb. After the attack on her family that saw her father stabbed, her mother jump into a pond, and her sister disappear, Tamij Saheb saved Sutara. What had happened to Sutara remains the unsaid core of the novel. Neither Sutara nor the reader is told about it. The physical violence that she was subjected to is only suggested through her nightmare and the question of little Moinu who asks her if she was thrashed badly:

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girls who are sitting by my side. And if any of these recovered women should come to me, then I will give them as much respect and honour as I accord to these young maidens.'

[111] *Ibid*, pp. 205-207. The authors cite Karuna Chanana amidst the education statistics who says that while partition narrowed physical spaces, it enlarged their social space. In Bagchi and Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and The Triumph*, Bithi Chakravarti narrates how she got around to studying after a hiatus of four years following partition and then took up a job to support the family when her father became ill.

> She could not clearly remember what had happened, but the dreadful memories of that night kept returning like a nightmare. Did she fall to the ground or was she pushed down? What happened after that? Who rescued her and when? For how long had she been running a fever?
>
> She could not bring herself to ask these questions. Even when she did, the others avoided answering directly. What was the matter with her? (p. 16).

For the family in Calcutta, the attack on her and her subsequent stay in a Muslim household means that she has 'lost' her 'purity' and is 'polluted'. To maintain the purity of the family and society women like Sutara must be expelled to the margins or outside the pale of society. The family finds it difficult to throw her out of the house. Instead they come up with a plan to educate her. She is sent to a hostel where many of the students are orphans like her having lost their parents either in the famine or partition violence. Sutara's education serves two purposes. Firstly it means that the 'sanctity' of the home and the 'pure' veneer of the family are not compromised. Secondly it means that once she has completed her education she could support herself. Her expulsion from the family is indicated by an incident. She is invited to the wedding of one of the daughters of the house:

> It was an invitation to Subha's wedding which was taking place on the 25th of Phalgun. Sutara's name was written on the envelope, not her brother's, who was now her natural guardian. This meant that she now had no one, that she would be known by her own name. (p. 58).

It is at this point that Sutara realises with a shock that she is her own guardian. Her ostracism is complete; she is no longer part of the kinship and the family. The family and society needed to educate girls like Sutara so that they could offload them without any sense of guilt or compassion. As I have said before, the nation state also encouraged such women to get educated with the specific purpose of being able to earn their livelihood. Such women were of no use to the family or community and neither would look after her well-being. For Sutara education offers her a chance to stay alive and is also instrumental in introducing her to a disparate community of displaced, lonely refugee women bound together by their grief, ostracism and the struggle to

live and find meaning to their lives. She has her familial identity taken away from her as her parents are dead and her brothers not keen to recognise her as their sister, but she finds other identities – as a figure in a chapter of the nation's history that the nation would rather forget, as one of a community of women who have been forsaken by families, society and the state, as Sutara Dutta, a teacher of history in Yajnaseni College.

Sutara is also able to create her own space, even though she is loath to call it home because she perceives home as a familial space and she has no family to share this space with her:

> Although Sutara found a place to stay, it was neither a home nor a household and least of all a nest created by a woman's love and care. But it was a room, a room of her own, and hers through her hard earned money. Did that make it a home? She knew, only too well, the bitter truth that she would never have a home. (p. 69).

However, that physical space adds to her sense of self-worth because acquiring that space means that she is no longer as vulnerable, she does not have to look up to others for shelter, and she does not have to live out her life in impersonal, communal spaces any longer. She is a teacher of history and she uses that intellectual space that she has acquired by the dint of her education to understand the location of women like herself in the nation's history. As she teaches the girls in College, they protest against the omissions in the text they are presented with as the nation's official history. When they question why stories from their regions are not included in the narrative, Sutara realises that she too is a part of the unacknowledged and unspeakable part of the nation's history. When Sakina's mother proposes that she marries Aziz, Sakina's brother, Sutara refuses not only because he belongs to that community a few of whom destroyed her family, but also because she resists being appropriated by any of the two communities. Hindu society has rejected her and she will not be absorbed by Muslim society. She finds her place among a community of women as they travel on a pilgrimage to the Himalayan shrines. In this novel and in the post partition descriptions in Sabitri Ray's *Meghna Podma* we find that education was no longer seen perceived

as a vehicle for enlightenment and knowledge. It had a more material objective. Female education became important for economic reasons in middle class Bengali families struggling for survival after partition. In post partition Bengal office-going women became a fairly common sight on the roads of the cities and in public transport.

Perceptions: What female education achieved

As has been indicated earlier the authors of these novels set great store by education. Education had been acquired through a lot of sweat and determination by each of these authors. While Jyotirmoyee and Ashapurna had been denied formal schooling, Sulekha Sanyal was lucky to have an aunt who ensured that the conservatism of the family did not prevent young Sulekha from going to school. She even defied her grandfather to sit for the Matriculation exam. So for them education signified something greater than sitting in a classroom and getting a few degrees. Their own education was far from conventional and to a certain degree they were self-taught. Jyotirmoyee had some initial lessons from a tutor, who came to the house, but after she was married and then after she was widowed she read on her own initiative. When sympathetic friends and relations realised her thirst for knowledge and her burning consciousness about humanity at large, they aided her by supplying her with books of all sorts.

As a child Ashapurna read by herself the numerous books in the house and one of fortunate things that happened after her wedding was that her husband got transferred to Calcutta. For Ashapurna it meant that she could access books once again. Ashapurna was a prolific and sharp writer and she gleaned everything that went into her writing from her reading and her observation of human life. Sulekha Sanyal's life had been a battlefield and she was constantly countering all kinds of adversities. Her personal troubles and her involvement in the Communist movement meant that her formal education was intermittent. She worked and studied and battled illness in phases through her short life. For Sulekha her education in Calcutta was directly instrumental in her coming into contact with the communist movement. As for

Jyotirmoyee Devi, her engagement with the world of letters broadened her horizon and she became a committed Gandhian. Ashapurna while not being involved in nationalist or any other brand of politics showed a deep awareness of political issues, juxtaposing the politics of gender with nationalist politics.

In their novels the authors acknowledge the importance of literacy, earning degrees and such aspects of formal education. However, what is more important, these works suggest, is the consciousness about the self and the world that education gives rise to and enhances. And this consciousness does not only stem from formal education but is also acquired through observing, reading and thinking. In the case of Jyotirmoyee Devi's Sutara, her consciousness about her own body and identity and the social reading that links the two together, about social practices, about the nation and its history, about the position of women like herself in the fabric of society, nation and history is slowly acquired through her experiences. As a student of history she can look back critically on her own life and analyse the nexus between the patriarchal society and the nation state that exiles women like her. In Ashapurna Devi's *Subornolota*, Subornolota's consciousness about the world that thrives outside the doors of the *ontohpur* comes through the books that she surreptitiously reads. For the battle-scarred Subornolota, the books convey what is great and beautiful, away from the mundane and petty things of daily living. She has this intense thirst for the world that she is denied. It is this thirst that leads her to plead with her husband to build a balcony in the new house from where she will be able to witness the world flowing by. She has an eye and an ear open to the sights and sounds of the world even if she is walled in. Hence reading is like a lifeline to her as it links her to the world beyond. For this pleasure, she decides to use subterfuge and borrows books on the sly, as women's reading is frowned upon in the house. It is actually quite uncharacteristic of Subornolota who despises lies and deception. This venture proves to be catastrophic and her husband interprets her act of borrowing books secretly from a man as evidence that she is unfaithful. For Subornolota, more important than going to school and acquiring formal education is the need to grow up as an enlightened, liberal and humane

being. From within narrow confines the mind and understanding needs to expand and grow.

Sulekha Sanyal's Chhobi is a little girl with lots of questions. Her education probably answers some of her questions but it also gives rise to many others as she engages with the world beyond the walls of the home. She questions the various taboos that structure the life of a woman, just as she questions the wide disparity in wealth between people. Chhobi is a unique individual and she is also quite individualistic in her rebelliousness and non-conformity. Odhir appreciates Chhobi's individuality but he also teaches her about her collective identity as a woman. When Chhobi comes back to the village after four years with her aunt and is restless, searching for something to do, Odhir advises her to go into the village and look for her friends from the *pathshala*. It is when Chhobi comes across two of them, one an anaemic mother of three and the other a desperate and helpless widow, that Chhobi acutely feels as one of them, feels that someone is trying to put walls around her and burying all her desires and potentials. It is a pivotal moment in Chhobi's development when she starts to perceive herself as one of many fighting for survival.

In Chhobi's case formal education also provided the opportunity to develop a political consciousness. Initially as a child Chhobi tried to fathom the arrest of Odhirka but she was unable to comprehend the significance of the entire act and what brought it about. When she is studying at Kumudini High, there is a hartal or strike for the release of prisoners who have been sent to the faraway Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean. Yet again it is difficult for Chhobi to follow the logic of the *hartal*. She leaves for school on the morning of the *hartal* with the maid from the school, but once she sees the young men picketing before the school gates it is difficult for her to disregard the strike and enter the school. In a moment the intensity and significance of the movement strikes her and there is also a shocked recognition of how casual and unthinking she had been that morning. It is the second lesson in political consciousness, which grows as Chhobi comes into personal contact with Sudha, a teacher of the school who is arrested by the police for her political activities. The political consciousness becomes an important component of

Chhobi's identity and spurs her to break the restrictive strictures of the home and the notions of feminine propriety during the Bengal famine of 1943. So in a way the school functions as an enabling space that is instrumental in transforming and developing Chhobi's sense of self and society.

In other words formal education created a space for intellectual and political fermentation and exchange of ideas. It was potentially a threatening, subversive and/or liberating space. The history of the political movements in Bengal testifies how politically conscious female students and the various political outfits used the school to become members and engage in subversive activities. Some active and famous Bethune alumni have been Sarala Devi, Lila Nag, Mira Duttagupta, Kamala Dasgupta, Ila Sen, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta (Joshi) and so on.[112] Lila Nag went on to establish about four schools herself and along with Dipali Sangha, the Dipali Schools (renamed as Kamrunnessa Girls' school and Bangla Bazar Girls' School) went on to become the sites of awakened nationalist consciousness and created a generation of female political activists.[113] Irrespective of their family's political leanings, girls could become participants in the political movement, helped by being away from home. Sometimes this participation was the result of individual initiative, while at other times they got swept away in a mass movement. However, quite frequently girls also became involved through some family members, who were either sympathisers or active participants.

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[112] See for details Kamala Dasgupta, *Swadhinota Songrame Banglar Nari* (Calcutta: Jayasri, 1963). Sarala Devi was the daughter of Swarnakumari Devi and the niece of Rabindranath Tagore; Lila Nag was initially a member of a revolutionary outfit *Sree Sangha* and then joined the Congress and subsequently the Forward Bloc of Subhash Chandra Bose; Mira Duttagupta was a member of the revolutionary group Bengal Volunteers and joined the Forward Bloc in 1946; Kamala Dasgupta had initially joined the revolutionary group Jugantar which later merged with the Congress in 1938 and Kamala for a while edited the women's periodical *Mandira* and remained by the side of Gandhi as he toured communally ravaged Noakhali; Ila Sen began her political career by joining the movement for boycott of the Simon Commission in 1928 and then became a member of the Nari Satyagraha Samiti and the All India Women's Conference; Pritilata Waddedar, a member of Surya Sen's group became one of the cult figures of the revolutionary movement as she became a martyr at the age of twenty-one Kalpana Dutta was also a member of the famous revolutionary Surya Sen's group and was active in the Chattogram Armoury Raid.

[113] Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*, pp.161-164.

The threatening perception of the school as a space enabling female transcendence of the private sphere was consequently real and valid. The poet Ishwar Gupta memorably articulated this fear in a verse-satire that described the thoroughly de-nationalised Bengali female.

In my grandmother's days girls were so pure!
They lived by the code and the rituals to be sure.
And then came Bethune and anon
All these feminine virtues have gone.
And gone with the wind is the woman demure.
And jettisoning those old world charms
These modern girls with books in their arms
Must learn their As, Bs, and Cs
To speak like Feringhees,
And drive their own four-in-hand
To visit the Maidan, and listen to the Band,
Sooner or later, boots will adorn their figures
And who knows, they may even take to cigars.

(Ishwar Chandra Gupta (1812-1859), *'Durbhiksha'*, written in the 1850s, pub. 1885, trans. Sukhendu Ray).

Almost a hundred years after Ishwar Gupta expressed his anxiety, the apprehension about the educated female and subversion of gender roles intensified as some of the patriarchal fears about unfettered, unsupervised individualistic females came to pass.

Writing 'her story'

'Her story' is difficult to come by. For long history had been the unequivocal rendition of 'his story'. This position began changing when the significant number of women entering the academia in the 1960s and began the task of engendering history. In India the only stories about women that were heard were those of some of the wise queens and learned wives of sages from ancient India. However, even in these stories and the popular stories that came from the epics and various myths, the virtues of the wise women were portrayed through serving the husband and family intelligently. For one it was important to tell these stories signifying the glorious state of ancient Indian civilization and then it was important to locate women firmly within the family to highlight their familial role for the emerging 'new' woman. Familial roles

were quite important for women then as it is now, but what these stories do is emphasise these roles at the cost of other roles. For women this is where the peril lies, as they are socialised through myths, legends, tales and rituals to imagine the familial roles as the only ones that they can inhabit. What was exciting about the late colonial and the early post-colonial period was the range of choices that opened up before Bengali women. Sometimes they opted to identify themselves as wives and mothers even when there were other avenues open to them. While that might legitimately be perceived as the obvious effect of socialisation, it must also be read as a choice that some women were in a position to make and wanted to make.

In the Indian subcontinent, the ephemeral nature of women's stories is linked to female illiteracy. Thus, to learn women's story feminist historians have had to resort to unusual sources like oral literature, wall paintings and embroidery because in the absence of more stable methods of recording their tales, these were some of the media that women could take to express themselves. Being denied education, women could not anyway write anything. They were told that writing brought about widowhood. It was obviously a ploy to keep women from learning and denying them the means to write 'history'. So women took to expressing themselves creatively through different media. However, to write 'history', they had to 'master' the written word.

It is my argument that if women wanted to educate themselves so as to access the structures of meaning to understand their world and to redress their powerlessness, women were also keen to educate themselves in order to be able to write their story, 'her story'. The volumes of writings that the newly educated women produced are an ample testimony to their urge to make themselves heard. Malavakia Karlekar reckons that almost 400 works by Bengali women were written between 1856 and 1910.[114] In these years more than 21 periodicals dedicated to women were also published. For this first generation of learners to be able to connect with a large section of readership must have had considerable significance. Through the printed

[114] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within*, p.11.

books and the articles in periodicals they finally had the platform to express what they perceived, to talk about their lives and their concerns and most of all they had a vehicle with which to reach out to women and men. As we see in the case of Subornolota's memoirs, she writes them to reach out to the other Subornolotas. Though displaying 'womanly' modesty, in many cases, they were quite uninhibited about expressing their thoughts. Even if the thoughts were not quite radical, the act of public expression was certainly radical and women were putting education to uses, which had not quite been conceived of by the earliest reformers.

We are witness to the writing of Rassundori Devi. A daughter and a daughter-in-law of a conventional and conservative family, she struggled hard, with virtually no help or instruction from anyone, so as to be able to read religious texts. After learning to read she next learns to write, so as to be able to reply to the letters her son wrote her. However, she does not stop at writing to her son, she also writes the story of her life, *Amar Jibon.* Evidently this unsophisticated, village woman thought she had stories to tell and the stories were worth telling. It becomes apparent that in the nineteenth and early twentieth century newly literate women were taking to writing in a big way. There were quite a few published and unpublished autobiographical writings of a varied range such as the ordinary housewife Rassundori Devi's *Amar Jibon*, the reformer Kissory Chand Mitter's wife Kailashbashini Devi's *Jonoiko Grihobodhur Diary*[115], Swarnakumari's daughter Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's *Jiboner Jhorapata*, the theatre actress Binodini's *Amar Kotha* and so on. Many women also went on to edit renowned periodicals like *Bharati* (1877), *Sramik* (1924), *Bangalakshmi* (1925), *Jayasri* (1931), *Bulbul* (1933), *Mandira* (1938), *Mahila* (1947) and *Begum* (1947) among a host of others.[116] They went on to write and publish numerous articles in all kinds of periodicals like *Bamabodhini Patrika* and *Nabanur* and *Masik Mohammadi.* Some like *Sougat,* edited by Mohammad Nasiruddin, made it a mission to get as many women as possible to write and publish and went a long way in establishing many

[115] Malavika Karlekar, p.122.
[116] Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, 'Samoikpotro-Sompadone Bongomohila', *Visva Bharati Patrika*, Sravan-Aswin, 1357.

women as authors. *Sougat* provided a platform for young authors like Ashapurna Devi, Protibha Bosu, Jyotirmala Devi and Sufia Kamal, who went on to become renowned litterateurs.

The writings comprised stories and poems, political articles, discussions about social problems, health issues and so on, but mostly women wrote about themselves and about problems pertaining to them. It appeared that they were taking charge of their lives and all the problems that went along with it. Earlier women had been the objects of reform, not the agents of reformation. From the late nineteenth century onward the appearance of numerous articles by women discussing issues that affected their lives created the impression that Bengali women were prepared to take the agency. While there is no intrinsic connection between education and taking agency, education is an enabling tool for women when they wish to act. Joan Kelly talks about restoring women to history and restoring our history to women.[117] In other words, there is the need to recognise the fact that women have tales to tell and they themselves must tell their tales. That is precisely what these women were doing as they came out with their letters to the editor, their short stories and novels, autobiographies, articles and poems. These were the historically suppressed voices of those women, who, across the generations, had failed to communicate. Now with their writings great grandmothers could connect with great granddaughters.

The urgency to tell 'her story' also emerges in the novels discussed here. As a woman who has felt the injustices inflicted on women by the overwhelmingly patriarchal order, Jyotirmoyee Devi has written incessantly about the 'story' of women that she says has never found representation in history. She terms the story of women the *Stri Parva*, which Vyasa tried to write unsuccessfully in the *Mahabharata.* Along with the collections of short stories and her many novels, Jyotirmoyee Devi also wrote various articles pertaining to women's issues and an autobiographical work, *Smriti Bismritir Torongo,*[118] which vividly traces her journey from childhood in Rajasthan through her early marriage and

[117] Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.1.
[118] Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Smriti Bismritir Torongo* (Calcutta: Nirmal Book Agency, 1986).

subsequent widowhood to her learning to live anew through her explorations in the world of literature. All her works bear testimony to her sharp observation of the lives women led or were forced to lead. In *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga,* the narrator Sutara is a teacher of history who suddenly discovers the gaps in history even as she is teaching it. She also discovers that hers is a tale that implicates the nation building process and unravels the hypocrisy of society. This is a part of the historical narrative that has not been recorded and will never be, but she, as a subject of that story, can write it. She tells her students:

> 'You can study in depth and write the history of your own nation. You can do it, can't you? And, remember, history is not confined to the pages of a book. Besides, the victor is always prejudiced about the history of the vanquished, he keeps things from coming to light, he prefers to conceal. Does history tell you about the weak and the poor? No. I am reminded of Tagore's lines:
> *Stop your long narrative and endless tales*
> *You spinner of falsehood.*' (p. 3)

There is, thus, a story to tell and it is up to Sutara to tell it. It is a difficult story to tell for it is written on her body, the 'defilement' of which is the focal point of the narrative. The moment of 'losing her purity' is continually present in the narrative, in the words and actions of those around Sutara, even as the narrative refuses to represent the moment physically. It is as if Sutara resists being defined by this single incident, which quite obviously influences the trajectory her life takes. In a strange way she takes agency of her own life and the way the story must be told. She tries to tell a story of her 'making' even as Brahminical Hindu society is scripting the story of her exile and annihilation.

Ashapurna Devi's trilogy of *Prothom Protishruti, Subornolota* and *Bokul Kotha* has an interesting Matryoshka doll-like structure. Like Jyotirmoyee Devi, Ashapurna also writes about the writing of history in her note at the beginning of *Prothom Protishruti.* She positions her work as the narrative of the *Ontohpur* that history has always neglected. The first narrator is the author Onamika Devi who in turn is writing from Bokul's notebook. Onamika Devi is the successful and confident public persona of the girl Bokul who was always

apologetic about her own existence and would hide herself out of existence if she could. Bokul is Subornolota's daughter and Sotyoboti's granddaughter. She feels that before she talks about her own life she must pay her homage to those who came before her and tried to carve out a way for women of her generation. She must tell their story first. In Bokul's notebook we find other narratives, Subornolota's memoir and Sotyoboti's letter. So the structure reads as a text within a text within a text. And that is how women's stories come, each narrative added to the next one for the forthcoming generations. Subornolota undertakes to write the story of her life and tries to get it published. For Subornolota it is a kind of release and a reaching out to the other Subornolotas who are being destroyed every moment or are buying their peace with their soul (p.340). The death of her parents and her mother's letter written to her before her death sets off in Subornolota an urge to communicate her story with the larger community of women. Sotyoboti had left her marital family after Subornolota had been married off by deceit by her grandmother and father without Sotyoboti's knowledge. Subornolota had not found any support from her father and brothers in what was for her a traumatic marriage. Her mother's letter is a kind of mooring for a friendless Subornolota and the ability to connect with her mother after death allows Subornolota to hope that if she wrote there would probably be some who would understand her. Through her writing, for the first time in her life Subornolota is also able to create a space for herself. All along she had begged her husband to construct an open space for her within the house from where she could breathe and look beyond. All her requests had been futile. Through her writing Subornolota is able to create a mental space even if she is denied a physical space. The communication between Sotyoboti and her daughter Subornolota is precarious but it allows for the possibility that mothers and daughters may connect even if across life and death. The precariousness of this possibility is underlined when Subornolota burns the copies of the book after it arrives from the printer and publisher. It almost reads like burning bridges but there is one witness to this bonfire – her youngest daughter Bokul. The story will travel even if consumed by the flames; Bokul will carry the memory of Subornolota's face reflecting the flame of the burning *smritikotha* (reminiscences). Bokul's notebook survives and

Onamika Devi undertakes to tell the unknown and unheard tales of Subornolota and Sotyoboti. In fact this is one way 'her story' has been borne through the years, in the memory of women till it became possible for women to record it in tangible materials.

Conclusion

If we follow the representation of the state of female education and the attitude to it in *Subornolota*, *Nobankur*, *Paka Dhaner Gan* and *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* it appears that in keeping with political and social changes and according to material necessities, the social perception of female education changed. As far as statistics show, the rate of female literacy changed only slightly over the twenty-five years and the attrition rate was as alarming as ever. However, both fiction and autobiographical writings suggest that some new things were happening like the acceptance of music as a discipline that girls could be trained in and the introduction of physical training for girls in nationalistic schools. In the Dipali schools set up by Lila Nag and the Sodor Balika Bidyaloy in Barishal[119] where Santisudha Ghosh taught, girls were trained to wield sticks and knives along with physical training. Tagore introduced the concept of women singing and dancing in public performances, something that Sabitri Ray also writes about in *Paka Dhaner* Gan and *Meghna Podma.* Sabitri Roy's *Sworolipi* describes the training of female students in martial arts like knife-throwing in nationalist ashrams. At the level of ideology, there seems to be a definite reconceptualisation of the purpose of female education in the wake of the partition induced migration and resettlement. There is an attempt to accommodate education that enables women to participate directly in production and other economic activities alongside what is perceived to be 'feminine' education.

Female education on the whole seems to be a mix of formal and informal instruction. The fictions depict indifferent schools, mostly situated in rural Bengal, some well run and dynamic urban schools and attempts at home instruction particularly in families where mothers were literate. In the twentieth

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[119] Santisudha Ghosh, *Jiboner Rongomonche* (Calcutta: Jaysri Prakasan, 1989), p.46.

century women emerged not only as the recipients of education but they were also educators in many cases. So women's agency is evident in more ways than one. Not only did women set up schools, there were quite a few women, even though not in sufficient numbers, who were teaching in schools, colleges and universities. In Sabitri Ray's writings we find women like Bhodra, Shita teaching in schools while Sumitra teaches in a College. Santisudha Ghosh became the first female lecturer of Mathematics in Barishal College in 1938, which was probably also the first College to allow coeducation.[120] In her memoir Sujata Choudhury describes how she became a lecturer teaching far away from home in the United Provinces in pre-Independence India.[121]

However, as the *Towards Equality* report makes clear, even though the Government agencies were ostensibly propagating equal educational opportunities for boys and girls and theoretically they could take up similar subjects, in reality it was not the same. Often girls' schools did not have adequate facilities for teaching science subjects and not very good teachers. Many times girls could not opt for 'cerebral' subjects as the limitations of the school compelled them to take up 'feminine' subjects like 'Home Science'. Sometimes parents discouraged girls from studying 'masculine' subjects. As Malavika Karlekar says in her preface to her book *Voices from Within*, when she wanted to pursue a Bachelor's degree course in Chemistry after doing quite well in her Senior Cambridge Examination, she was dissuaded by her father who had himself studied Chemistry. He thought she would not be able to cope with long hours of laboratory work and the rigours of a science education, and asked her to study Political Science instead.[122] So while education was enabling there were preconceptions and prejudices that affected the education of girls.

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[120] *Ibid,* pp. 72-74. Santisudha was the second female student to gain entrance to B.M. College as an undergraduate student in 1924.The first female student was admitted 4 years earlier but left after a few months.

[121] Sujata Choudhury, *Mone Achhe* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 2000). Sujata Choudhury was a brilliant scholar and there seems to have been no doubt in her family that she would pursue an academic career. She taught in Calcutta before moving to Moradabad and Aligarh in 1939-40; then returned to Lady Brabourne College in Kolkata where she eventually became Principal.

[122] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within*, pp. xiii-xiv.

In terms of educational facilities, girls in urban areas were better off than girls in rural areas who had to travel far to access it, if their families supported female education. However, the bias against female education cuts across the rural/urban divide in these novels. The attitude of families to female education changed usually when the pecuniary benefits became important and the survival of the family itself was at stake. Otherwise, more than the education of fathers, it was the education of the mother that finally determined whether the girl child would have access to education. Between older and younger generations of women there is a difference in their understanding of education for girls. For the older generations like Chhobi's grandmother Purnoshoshi, education proper for girls was that which prepared them for their domestic roles while schools simply provided literacy that distracted the girls from their 'real' education. For the younger women like Momota and Sukumari, education and not merely literacy was key to transforming the traditional roles that was the destiny of women to play. They did not challenge these roles but definitely sought an empowered status for women even when playing traditional 'feminine' roles.

The perceptions of education in these texts are quite idealistic and they imagine the development of women if they received ideal education. There is a lot of promise in a girl like Chhobi and the education she receives from the school, her surroundings, Sudha, Odhirka and others help her to grow into a sensitive, conscious and responsible young woman. There is a valorisation of knowledge as an instrument of growth and enlightenment. There are also doubts and critiques. When Chhobi leaves for the village for her higher education, it is a personal victory for her and Momota, but for one Chhobi there are millions like Sukumari, Binti, Lotu, Maya, Durga, Saraswati and Sephu. Durga asks Chhobi to do something for her but will Chhobi's education empower her so that she can save Durga from her life as a Hindu widow? There is a consciousness that the Chhobis of the world were too few; education had touched very few lives to make a huge difference to the lives of women generally. The most explicit critique of education can be seen in Ashapurna Devi's trilogy. Particularly when we come to the last book, *Bokul Kotha*, we see that education by itself does not necessarily bring about a

more equitable and just social order. It does not give women a direction. Education is the not the last word in the struggle to become a human being, particularly if that education lacks a soul and consciousness; in that case it is no better than the parrot-like rote learning at *Ponditmoshai's Pathshala.* Ashapurna holds out a hope, however, in the shape of Suhashini who changed her life through her education and Bokul's niece Shampa, who is fearless, humane, and compassionate, with the courage and ability to make what she wants of her life.

.A distinctive feature of the novels analysed here are the sheer volume of questions that the girls/women ask. It reminds of Caliban's comment: 'You taught me language; and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse.' The protagonists in the novels do not curse but learn to ask questions that the others around them find difficult to answer. For someone like little Chhobi it is not enough to ask questions, she demands answers to her questions. The one fallout of education seem to be that women start querying the status quo and why is it that things are the way they are. For a hide-bound society such questions are disconcerting and deeply unsettling to say the least. Female education made it impossible to gag these questions and challenges that probed deep into the patriarchal structure and norms of Hindu society.

Despite all the adversities they encountered, women tried to stretch the boundaries of female education in Bengal. They transcended the circumscribed private space and the familial roles while also proving their intellectual ability to deal with cerebral subjects, making their 'different' voices heard and writing history. Partition of India and Bengal, and the Bengal Famine earlier, dealt a body blow to Bengali women, but it was also liberating. It brought about significant changes in their roles and the social turbulence gave them the bargaining space whence they were better placed to negotiate the identity politics. For all the marginalisation efforts of her kin, Sutara is able to establish a position for herself in the public space as a socially productive being and a respected teacher giving shape to other human lives. Similarly Bonya in Sabitri Ray's *Meghna Podma* is able to make the transition from being an unwanted girl to an accomplished artist and a breadwinner of the

family responsible for the wellbeing of so many people. Women used their education to take to various professions and social catastrophe made it valid for them to seek access to the public sphere. Finally female education enabled Bengali women to inhabit non-familial spaces, making it possible for them to don roles other than or in addition to that of wife and mother.

Chapter 3: It's a Long Road to Freedom: The Bengali Woman and the Independence Movements

Kalpana Joshi (neé Dutt), Chittagong 1943

Photo by Sunil Janah

Malavika Karlekar, *Visualizing Indian Women 1875-1947 (New Delhi: OUP 2006)*

Inclusion of Indian women in nationalist politics

This leprous daybreak, dawn night's fangs have mangled –
This is not that long-looked-for break of day,
Not that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades
Set out, believing that in heaven's wide void
Somewhere must be the stars' last halting place,
Somewhere the verge of night's slow-washing tide,
Somewhere an anchorage for the ship of heartache.
... the hour
Of mind and spirit's ransom has not struck;
Let us go on, our goal is not reached yet.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *Subh-e-Azadi*, August 1947, trans. V.G.Kiernan in 'Poems by Faiz' (New Delhi: OUP, 1971).

In the past two and a half decades feminist historiography has tried to document the political participation and politicisation of Indian women in. narratives that concern the struggle for Indian independence and nation building. The rigorous efforts of scholars in India and abroad have redressed to great extent the imbalance in representation of the involvement of Indian women in the political movements of the twentieth century. However, the under-representation and marginalisation of Indian women in the narratives in the earlier decades suggests how the politics of identity, which Indian women have experienced and contested in the political sphere among others, operates. In this chapter I examine how the politics of the various movements, the documentation and the telling, and the politics of the identity of 'modern' Bengali women are intertwined. In the first place the colonial critique of the state of Indian women had already ensured that women must be represented and made visible in the public sphere or the nationalists ran the risk of having their 'progressive' image tarnished before the world. Secondly, to ensure any measure of success the movements had to have mass sympathy and participation, which meant that women had to be included.

With the setting up of international bodies like the League of Nations in 1919, the issue of projecting an image to the world community became a matter of concern both to the colonial administration and the nationalists. As feminist historians have noted, many of the bills relating to women that were being

debated in the houses were brought forth with the international community in mind.[123] Both the government and the Indian members of the House had to work in tandem so that neither was seen as regressive or conservative with respect to 'women's issues'. It was a tough battle because the government, but for its image, was quite indifferent to issues like universal franchise and right to public offices for both men and women and there were many among the nationalists also who opposed the bills. Later it was proudly said that India was among the earliest countries to grant franchise to women. It was made to seem as if it was a privilege that was handed to Indian women on a platter. The battle that Indian women waged for their rights is glossed over. It required long periods of struggle and negotiation and creation of pressure lobbies for Indian women to acquire the right to contest for political office and for franchise.[124] Women political activists were to be disappointed a number of times by the opposition of their male counterparts in the nationalist parties as well as by the Colonial government in their efforts to secure universal franchise.

In the first section of this chapter I will focus on the process of politicisation of women in Bengal to understand the causes at work that made it possible for Bengali women to enter mainstream politics. It is my argument that while there were external factors that contributed to the politicisation of Bengali women, their own consciousness and agency were also a crucial factor. There were repeated attempts to marginalize them but they organised themselves and tried hard to keep women's issues in focus. Next I focus on

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[123] Geraldine H. Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 85, 89. Forbes says that in fact that the government did not amend or repeal the Sarda Act in spite of the threat by the Muslim organisations that unless they were excluded from the Act, they would launch an agitation, had less to do with the watchful eye of the women's organisations than with world opinion and the importance of political consistency. Government files indicate since the government was aware that the subject excited 'the interest and attention of the League of Nations' and an amendment would suggest the weakness of the British administration. Also in the light of Katherine Mayo's attack on Indian customs, particularly use of child brides, the British were keen to establish before the world community that they were eager supporters of reformative social legislations.

[124] Geraldine H. Forbes, 'Votes For Women: The Demand for Women's Franchise in India' in Vina Mazumdar (ed.), *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1979), pp. 3-20. Also see Forbes, *Women in Modern India,* p. 93-112, Maleka Begum, *Banglar Nari Andolon* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2002), pp.67-68. For an overview of the entire battle waged by women's organisations for franchise and political office see Introduction, pp. 43-44.

some novels to examine how the political movements have been represented and how women's roles and activities within these movements have been perceived and critiqued. It will be my argument that whenever women have tried to write about the period of Indian independence struggle, they have habitually conflated the issue of the nation's three hundred years of subjugation with the issue of women's perennial subjugation. For them the emancipation of women and the freedom of the nation were issues that were intertwined. It would be a false freedom if the women did not experience freedom with the nation because the nation comprised women also.

Women in Bengal had been inspired to work in the cause of the nation right from the days of the *Bongo-Bhongo Andolon* in 1905 when the entire people rose against Curzon's proposal to partition Bengal. There were limitations to what they could do and activities were confined to tying the thread of brotherhood, the *rakhi*, around the wrists of all Bengalis irrespective of their religious, caste or class denomination, and cessation of cooking or *orondhon.* However, as the emotionally charged battle to free the motherland from the clutches of the colonial power hammered at the doors and walls of the *ondormohol*, Bengali women found their material conditions did not allow them to partake of the activities that their men folk undertook. The reform of the status of women had long been an issue of discussion and debate in Bengal but at the turn of the century women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and the irrepressible Begum Rokeya started arguing that the 'unshackle' paradigm was as much applicable to women as the nation.

A difficulty that women have faced whenever they have tried to confront the asymmetrical power balance is their inability to forge themselves as a homogenous category, divided as they are in terms of religion, class and caste. All these divisive categories intersect to create small subsets of women whose niggling resources do not help them to resolve their problems. Also they lack the strength of numbers. Thus, women's associations like the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* started by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani in 1910 came forward to provide a separate forum to women to come together. The little that was taught in these associations like writing and sewing, knitting and other crafts

did not improve the lives of the women dramatically and in most cases were not sufficient to make them economically self reliant. However these stirrings of education as well as the tumult around them worked to awaken the consciousness of Bengali women about the myriad aspects of the concept of freedom. Begum Rokeya writes that the nation cannot be a healthy organism if one half of it is weak and degraded.[125] This brings us to an interesting contradiction.

The idea of the nation, which essentially works on the exclusion principle, has been portrayed in Indian nationalist literature as a mother. Consequently women as potential and real mothers are the nation, yet the nation in reality seems to consist of the sons. The only explanation that could be offered here is that just as the mother symbolises the nation similarly women symbolise the archetypal mother. Indian women, at the end of the day, are simply a metonym of the nation. This is a contradiction that women in many nations live with, where they are the nation symbolically but in real terms the nation comprises a brotherhood of men, the symbolic sons of the symbolic mother. This dichotomy does not in most cases have a bearing on the functions of the state machinery and institutions in liberal democracies. However it is a conceptual problem that comes to the fore in a most compelling way during times of crises like civil wars, communal riots and other unrests that may be of ethnic, linguistic, casteiest or religious nature. At such times scholars are led to ask what the status of women is in a nation state. In India during the communal pogroms that accompanied the partition of India as well as those that have since taken place in free India and in the 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia, Sudan and Rwanda, the 'value' attributed to women as 'symbolic entities' had, paradoxically been nullified by their 'real' subjecthood. Their symbolic objectification became primary in the imagination of the people at the cost of their 'real' citizenship. Consequently they are 'mothers' whose honour must be protected or conversely they are enemy wombs that must be

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[125] Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 60. In 'Ardhangi' (The Other Half, 1904), Rokeya writes'... let us have a look at the two-wheeled cart. If one wheel of the cart is larger (the husband) than the other (the wife), then the cart can hardly move forward. It will go round and round at the same spot. This is precisely the condition of us Indians; we are hardly able to press forward.'

conquered and defiled. Sometimes they are territories that must be recovered as witnessed in the Indian government's recovery programme of abducted women who were not given the chance to opt for where they wanted to stay. During 'normal' times women in 'liberal democracies' do have access to all rights as citizens along with men, and recourse to the various institutions for redressal of their problems. However, in crisis-ridden situations when the normal legal and administrative frameworks are temporarily suspended, there is the free play of the collective popular imaginary construct of the nation and citizenship, which may not reflect the liberal ideology of the institutions. It is in such situations that women become aware of their ambiguous and problematic status within the nation state. Bengali women's narratives question this exclusion principle implicit in the concept of the nation, firmly positioning women in the community of the nation.

The logic of politicising Indian women

During the period 1930-1955, Bengal experienced broadly two sorts of political movements, one spurred by the subjugation of the nation to the colonial power and the other inspired by the cause of social and economic justice. The Congress and the various groups allied to it and the revolutionary organisations were engaged in fighting the British to 'free' the country while the communists and the peasant organisations along with the trade unions were fighting social and economic exploitation, the 'internal' enemy as it were. In the context of the Indian freedom movements, the politicisation of men and women had a very definite focus. While men and to a lesser extent women had been involved in the various regional, localised political movements, to galvanise the anti-colonial struggle a widespread, popular movement was needed. The Gandhian satyagraha tried to be such an inclusive mass movement. As Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay notes in her recollections of the heady days of the Civil Disobedience movement[126] Gandhi's call to women to break the salt laws brought thousands of women out of the zenana onto the

[126] Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, 'Reminiscences of the Salt Satyagraha' and interview in Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay Papers, Oral History Transcript, NMML, New Delhi. Kamala Devi recollects, 'The city seemed to have disgorged its entire population. It was not the straggling batch of seven that was breaking the Salt- Law, but hundreds and thousands now filling the water's edge. And still they kept coming, thousands of women amongst them, striding like proud warriors...'

public thoroughfares. It was a brilliant strategy that made it possible for those people who had hitherto been on the margins of the movements to participate in them. Women without compromising their 'femininity' or their roles as mothers and wives could carry on making illegal salt, spin on the *charkha* and join in picketing, marches or *prabhat pheris* (pre-dawn or dawn walk by a group of people singing nationalist and religious songs). After decades of sporadic strikes against the government, the leaders had realised that the politicisation of the masses was crucial to the success of their struggle. Hence for the political parties, women's participation became necessary for political exigencies, and inviting them into the political arena was not inspired by any liberal, reformist agenda. Later, when freedom of the nation had been achieved women were expected to go back to their familial roles and leave the political arena to the male activists.

However this seems inadequate as an explanation when we look for reasons for the increasing politicisation of some sections of the female population during this era. Here we must remember some specifics of female political activism. Firstly, while the numbers were considerably larger then many narratives of political history would have us believe, in terms of percentage of the total population the numbers of women involved in any capacity in the movements were quite small. Secondly, it is difficult to say with any degree of accuracy what this percentage might have been since the roles that women were involved in were diverse, some only as sympathisers with their activities limited to sheltering the activists and helping with donations, while others headed local and regional units and were in direct 'line of action'. Thirdly, the population of women political workers was a heterogeneous mix. However that is not to say that participation was completely random. An analysis of the background of the activists will show that certain women were likely to join certain movements and play a set of roles within these movements. The Congress seemed to attract women from more advantaged sections of society, as it was an elitist organisation to begin with. Later on the charisma and the philosophy of Gandhi, coupled with the mode of agitation that he devised attracted both conservative middle class women and deprived, poor women. With the Congress striving to become a mass-based organisation,

many women were drawn into Congress activities like picketing, making salt, or spinning on the charkha. The women who joined the revolutionaries were few in number but tended to be educated and from fairly middle class families. The women who were keen to participate in direct action were usually quite young and were recruited from certain places like Chittagong, Barisal, Dhaka where these organisations were based. The older women tended to be sympathisers who were not very educated and whose roles were usually involved providing shelter and hiding firearms and banned literature. Among the communists there were educated urban middle class women who had been converted to communism by the communist ideology, exploited peasant women, women living in industrial slums and the post-partition refugee women from across the social spectrum united by displacement, homelessness and poverty. It seems quite clear that while educated middle class women could join any political organisation, the more disadvantaged women were more likely to participate in only those movements that espoused issues that had a direct bearing on their lives like food, shelter, rights of share croppers and so on.[127] However this covered a wide cross section of society, urban and rural, middle class, peasant and industrial workers, educated and illiterate women. What made it possible for women or indeed what inspired women to engage with the male bastion of political activism? What was the impact of the politicisation, spurred on by the various movements, on Bengali women? How did Bengali women according to their rural/urban and economic position respond to the political movements? How did the movements affect the large number of women in the *ondormohol* who were uninvolved observers? What was the relationship of political and non-political women to the political movements? What did the movements expect from women and what did the women in turn expect from the movements? What did women benefit from the political movements as workers, sympathisers or simply as observers? Through a close reading of Ashapurna Devi's *Subornolota*, Sabitri Roy's *Trisrota*, *Sworolipi* and *Paka Dhaner Gan* and Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur*, this chapter will try to analyse these issues as they are addressed in these novels.

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[127] Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising*, pp.52-60.

The key to Bengali women's engagement with the political sphere can be located in the sentiments expressed by Sarala Devi Choudhurani in her speech at the Bengal Women's Conference in 1931 when she says quite clearly that 'woman's feelings have never been the man's, neither the woman's point of view, his.'[128] One of the ways women went about expressing their voices was by setting up women's organisations. Often these organisations had a non-political bias, meaning that they sought to focus on women's issues instead of engaging in nationalist political ventures and did not have any political affiliation, though some members were also affiliated to various political parties. They sought to work with both the colonial state and the nationalists to redress issues that affected women. There were other organisations like the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti*, which was formed in the context of the Bengal famine and then continued to work with refugee women after partition. *MARS* was a non-political organisation with the members sporting diverse ideologies but the leadership was largely provided by the communist women. Often attempts were made by male colleagues to sabotage and derail women's projects like that of universal and compulsory female education spearheaded by the Bengal Women's Education League.[129] So the organisations had the twin purpose of following an independent agenda towards improving the condition of Indian women and pressurising the government and the nationalist parties to address women's issues.

However, the attempt by the women's organisations to highlight various issues relating to women meant that these issues became separate concerns

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[128] *Stri Dharma*, 'Srimati Saraladevi Choudrani's Speech at the Bengal Women's Congress', September 1931, Vol. 16, No. 11, p. 508.

[129] Barbara Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Rights, Education and Social Reform Legislation, 1921-1936* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), pp. 148-203. In 1927, a Rural Primary Education Bill was introduced in the Bengal Legislative Council. This was an important issue for women educators who were concerned that the goal of universal education should apply to girls as well as boys. There was considerable amount of debate between the Congress members, the Muslim Education minister and the British administration about who would pay for the cost of the exercise and the control government officials would have over the district boards that would administer the scheme. After much wrangling when the Bill was eventually passed, but no provision was made for inclusion of women in the local school boards to defend girls' rights of to education and there was no guarantee that the act would be applicable to the female population. pp. 182-200.

and were not part of the mainstream any more, even though gender concerns continued to feature in nationalist politics. Nevertheless, the organisations allowed Indian women to work towards a 'subject' position and find a 'voice'. So as opposed to nineteenth century Bengal when men advocated reforms for women, here we find women collectively voicing their concerns, which they regarded as universal, and parleying with the state as subjects in their own right. Given the impossibility of constructing a common subject position, the voice of the organisations always remained a fractured one, and some would say elitist. Later communal politics made it even more of a fractured mandate, yet this was the first time that women pooled together their resources for political action. Documents of the organisations like WIA and AIWC testify to the intense activity undertaken by the members to force public opinion or to influence the deliberations in parliament.[130] Women's organisations enabled a section of women to bargain for power and greater rights in a period of political flux.

This gave rise to a paradoxical situation where the same issues that had inspired the reformers were given short shrift when women came together to push for the redressal of those same issues. As 'women's issues' they were trivialised and marginalised, even though they remained problematic and debatable as always. Partha Chatterjee has written about the disappearance in the twentieth century of the 'women's question' that had figured so largely in the nineteenth century political debates as a result of the nationalist resolution of the question.[131] I would argue that the 'women's question' does

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[130] Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1982), pp.58-71. Ray narrates how she along with others had advocated resolutions on the removal of disabilities of women in the social laws of marriage by the enforcement of monogamy, the right to divorce, and the inheritance right of women, at the annual session of the Women's Social Conference held during the Congress session in 1928 and presided over by Maharani Sethu Parvathi Bai of Travancore. Many social workers including the author's grandaunt Lady Abala Bose, C.R. Das's daughter Aparna Ray and others were dismayed. A woman belonging to Brahmo Somaj attacked Ray saying, 'You have only been married two or three years and you are already wanting a divorce!' Later some of them went to Ba (Kasturba Gandhi) and asked her to sign a statement against the procedures adopted by the Maharani of Travancore, which Ba refused to do. *The Statesman* also criticised women like Mrs. Ray for suggesting birth control and the limitation of families at a public conference, asking if that was the work of respectable ladies.

[131] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 233-237. See discussion in Chapter 2, p. 89.

not disappear nor is it resolved, just the questioning voices change; women start asking the 'women's question' and instead of reforms, the talks start veering towards 'rights'. It would also be fallacious to suppose that there was ever any period in the life of the Indian nation when the politics of gender had become less than important; if it was the concern of the reformists in the nineteenth century, it remained a concern of the politicians in the twentieth. Indeed if we look at the bills that were being tabled in parliament during the 1930s, 40s and 50s, it becomes obvious how much of nationalist politics was about the politics of gender. There are the extensive and acrimonious debates about the Sarda Bill also known as the age of consent bill, about inheritance rights in the Muslim community, about representation of women in the various houses at the centre and at state levels, about female franchise and universal female education and about what came to be known as the Hindu Code Bill. There were all kinds of voices that were heard during the debates in the Houses and not all of them were conservative or reactionary and very few of them were women's. Women were unable to participate as they lacked representation, which they made up for through discussions in forums outside the legislative houses.[132] Hence, it is difficult to acquiesce totally to Chatterjee's argument that there was a 'nationalist resolution of the women's question'. Evidently the 'women's question' still occupied the attention of the nationalists, though now women had taken up the initiative.

Women's agency in politicisation

It is possible to locate women's agency in the entire process of politicisation. There were indeed external factors that made it possible for Indian women to access the political realm but women also seized the enabling conditions created by external factors to make a place for themselves in the political domain. Education prepared a large number of Bengali women to take up the call to join nationalist politics. However it must be noted that while a large number of urban educated women entered the political arena they were not the only ones. In Bengal, the agitation by the sharecroppers, the *Tebhaga Andolon*, the various demonstrations against black marketing as well as for

[132] See the correspondence file in Renuka Ray's private papers, Oral History Transcripts, NMML, New Delhi.

the distribution of food at fair prices during the Bengal famine and in the political struggles of the refugees in post partition Bengal we see the participation of women from all walks of life. However, as has been mentioned earlier, there is a difference in the political response of urban, middle class, educated women and their sisters who came from a more disadvantaged position in society. The women coming from deprived backgrounds were more likely to join movements for social and economic justice that affected their lives directly rather than fight for freedom from a remote ruler whose presence or absence seemed to have no tangible impact on their lives.

In retrospect it seems that the time was ripe for the politicisation of women. The nationalist movement itself was moving into a different gear and needed to involve the women and women themselves were better equipped to respond to the evolving political situation. Being educated, many urban women like Santisudha Ghosh for example could take up responsible positions within the Congress party. They in turn inspired other less educated or illiterate women to join in the political struggle by simply providing leadership and a role model. Thus we see how in Bombay under the leadership of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, in response to Gandhi's call, many ordinary women, housewives who had never stepped out of their houses before, came out in the open to make illegal salt. Similarly in Manikuntala Sen's autobiography we see village women like Batasi being educated and trained by the *MARS* activists and evolving into a dedicated party worker. She went on to provide leadership during the *Tebhaga* struggle as Bimala Majhi.[133] So in a way the education of a small section of women had a percolating effect and served to galvanise many others who did not have a chance to educate themselves. For Bengali women, particularly those of the urban middle class, this was the first opportunity they had to inhabit a public role that was legitimised by the necessities of the time. It would appear that women in Bengal took advantage of the ferment of the times to extend their space and take to roles that would be denied to them in other situations.

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[133] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom*, pp.92-93. Bimala was a child widow who worked with Manikuntala Sen.

Autobiographies of women coming from diverse political background like Renuka Ray, Manikuntala Sen and Bina Das, contain accounts of a few women taking up positions investing them with power and responsibility. Sometimes these are positions within the party, sometimes in the municipality or corporation, and sometimes as an appointed official of the state. These writings express an eagerness to fulfil their potential in positions of responsibility while carefully forbearing from any hint of ambition.[134] However, the low percentage of women in public offices shows that the process of politicisation did not necessarily translate into access to greater resources and political office. In fact quite often Bengali women experienced the replication of the older power hierarchies in the 'radical' political outfits and in many cases found that the roles they were expected to play were actually the corollaries of the 'helpmeet' notion that was so popularised by Victorian fiction. They found that radicalism in politics did not translate into radicalism in gender roles. The revolutionary *Sree Sangha* found it extremely difficult o accept Lila Nag as the leader and split down the middle. There was an attempt to limit the activities of women to certain areas that in effect meant that most of the time they were not involved in decision-making. Women recognised that they were useful to the parties as law-breakers but the party was loath to see them as lawmakers.[135] Documents relating to the elections that took place in colonised and in free India show how women members were kept from electoral politics, as a device to keep them from nation-building activities and public office.[136] This turn of events is not unique to India

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[134] See Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (London: The Women's Press, 1997), pp. 22-24.

[135] See 'Srimati Saraladevi Choudrani's Speech at The Bengal Women's Congress', *Stri Dharma*, September 1931, Vol. 16, No.11.

[136] See private papers of Hansa Mehta, Forbes Collection, European Manuscripts, India Office Library. Also papers of Sucheta Kripalani, Oral History Transcripts, NMML, New Delhi. In Hansa Mehta's papers we find a letter by Mrs. Reddi asking for more women to be presented as candidates in general seats: 'there is a feeling that the Congress Party in Madras is going to put up only men candidates for all the four general seats for the Madras City Urban, as there is a reserved seat for one Hindu woman for the City. In justice and in fairness they ought to give at least one of the four general seats to a woman. They cannot plead that there is no suitable woman in the Madras City. So also the political parties in other provinces ought to return at least a few women through the general constituencies in addition to the seats reserved for women.' There is a reply to this letter probably signed by Nehru: 'When politics is run on party lines, it is not possible to insist or to expect that only the best qualified candidates will be chosen, because in a party organisation an individual necessarily plays a very minor part. By expecting political parties to adopt a woman candidate for the

and almost everywhere it has been seen that revolutions have not revolutionised women's lives.

Freedom of the nation from the perspective of Bengali women

In their novels the authors, Ashapurna Devi, Sulekha Sanyal and Sabitri Roy critique the various political movements and juxtapose these liberating movements with the stasis that was sought to be maintained in the private sphere of the home and the relations of oppression that characterised gender relationships. Just as the nationalists questioned how the British could profess to be fighting for the liberation of nations occupied by the Germans when they denied the same right of sovereignty to Indians, in her trilogy Ashapurna Devi asks the same question of the patriarchal society in Bengal. In *Subornolota*, Ashapurna portrays an encounter between Subornolota, a wife and a mother who is fretting and fighting to extend the perimeters of her existence, and Ombika, a political worker fighting for the freedom of the country. Subornolota comes across a political activist for the first time when she meets Ombika at her sister-in-law Subola's village. Her husband, to escape the plague epidemic that is ravaging Calcutta, has left Subornolota at a village with their children. It is Subornolota who puts it forcefully to Ombika that no one can quite understand the plight of subjugation as women do because they are the 'slaves of slaves':

> 'Which means you feel for this thing.' Ombika says, 'you realise the humiliation of being subjugated. That is what startles me.'
> Suborno, face glowing, says, 'What is so startling? If we women do not understand the pain of subjugation then who will? We are slaves even to the slaves.'
> 'You must be empresses!' Ombika stresses, 'women must come forward and join hands!'
> 'Will you? Will you let us join?' Suborno glows radiantly, 'are you willing to take women into your group?'
> ... Ombika says, 'we have to infuse life into lifeless rocks. Just as we bring to life idols of mud and rock!'
> Suborno shakes her head slowly, says, 'Those who will go straight to hell if they happen to glimpse the sun or the moon, whose entire lives are spent in *porda*, they will work!' (pp. 217-219)

General Constituency simply because she is a woman, will I think amount to reservation in disguise.'

In Subornolota's words the nation and the women are transposed into each other. It is impossible to have freedom of the one without freedom of the other; a nation cannot be regarded as free exclusive of women. In *Subornolota* Ashapurna explores the notion of freedom in all its nuances and the glorious fight for the political freedom of the nation is put into perspective. In fact this novel succeeds in undermining the glorious narrative of political independence by juxtaposing it with the story of women's unequal struggle for freedom. When the Gandhian non-violent civil disobedience movement sweeps the country, Subornolota is a much older woman with grown-up children. She has moved with her husband and children to a separate house where she finally has a veranda that she had so craved for. Probodh is anxious that Subornolota may leave home with Parul and Bokul and join the picketers on the street. Her son Kanu brings a charkha home expecting that Subornolota will join the millions of others in spinning on the charkha. Subornolota does neither. Subornolota does not believe that these efforts will bring about the desired freedom. She is wrong in a way and in a way she is right. The nation does become independent through Gandhi's leadership and his mode of agitation and intense negotiations. Yet this is not the desired-for freedom, as Faiz has said. There is no revolutionary change in the social order or in the political set-up. The maladies in the body politic continue to fester. Subornolota perhaps understands instinctively that the changes are superficial. Like always people, including her family members, have recognised which way the tide is flowing and have judiciously decided to flow with the tide. She calls the marches and the spinning a 'fashion'. In her own home it is still a struggle to get daughters educated, to invite in a visitor and talk to them, to go out on her own. All the spinning going on has not and will not change these. Hence for Subornolota spinning, picketing, marching is merely 'fashion', devoid of the spirit of commitment to change. Subornolota's scepticism throws into relief the many failures of the nationalist movement that the glorious political narratives conceal. When nationalism makes a legitimate entry into the *ondormohol* in the shape of Kanu's charkha, it comes with patriarchal support and supervision, which was not the case when

Subornolota had tried to introduce *swodeshi* in the household years earlier. Her enthusiasm had been derided then as was her apathy now.

Subornolota is located in the *ondormohol* of a middle class Bengali family. The world flows outside in the streets and lanes and within the inner quarters the women only hear murmurs of the great events. It is as if all the liberating notions of the world stops at the doors to the *ontohpur*. The narrator refers to all the wonderful things happening, like the first woman graduating, the Swadeshi *andolon*, women taking part in the protests against the British, boycott of British goods but none of it changes what goes on in the lives of the women. The dynamism of the world outside is contrasted to the stasis inside the home. The independence struggle being waged 'outside' becomes conspicuous by its absence within the inner quarters. Instead of the politics of the British and the nationalists we have patriarchal politics that divides the women and preserves the hegemony of the patriarchy. In Ashapurna's novel the inner quarters is teeming with women, the mother-in-law, the wives and daughters of the four brothers, and the sisters on occasional visit to their natal home, along with visiting female relatives. It seems that the women work together only when they are operating as instruments of the patriarchy. The women, apart from Subornolota, do not question their animal-like existence consisting of cooking and eating, sleeping and squabbling and breeding. The only dissenting voice is Subornolota's. The alternative vision is available in Subola's village, where she can see the working of the notion of freedom. Her sister-in-law lives with her mother-in-law, husband and her many children. They are not highly educated or flush with money. Yet there is harmony in the household and the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is supportive and creative like the *kãtha* that the old woman embroiders on torn and tattered cloth. The relationship between the husband and wife is gentle and loving without any overt display of dominance by the husband. They work with each other to run the household and bring up their children. There is material want in the household but no want of happiness. The narrator describes Subola's smile: 'Subola's skeletal face laughs loud.' (p. 214). Subornolota is almost envious of this overworked and malnourished housewife, in the joy that is apparent in every moment of her life. Subornolota

is surprised and delighted beyond belief to see that the girls and boys both go to Ombika's school. Later this same Subola is not in the least apologetic or ashamed when her brother Probodh chastises her about marrying her daughters out of caste. She is happy that she married them to hardworking grooms who will provide for them and keep them happy.

Through this little excerpt from the village in *Subornolota*, there is a suggestion of how the struggle for independence could become a positive force in the lives of the common people. It is not just women that Ashapurna wants to focus on. Her gaze is on the entire social order that is exploitative and oppressive, and dehumanises not only the oppressed but also the oppressor. By making the reader aware of the historical timeframe yet by refusing to grant primacy to the political events considered defining in the life of the nation, Ashapurna critiques the struggle for freedom as not relevant to a large section of the population. Ombika's political credentials fires Subornolota's imagination but it does not cloud her sense of social reality that perceives how little a change of rulers in Delhi and Calcutta is going to affect the lives of the ordinary people. To Subornolota what is important is the dignity of the people and the chance to grow, which she feels could be the real gain from the independence struggle. If women are able to become a part of Ombika's political outfit, it might bring about a social revolution that will extend the boundaries of women's knowledge, enhance their confidence and transform the narrow confines of the *ontohpur*. Through the depiction of a single village Ashapurna also suggests how precious and precarious this social change is, constantly threatened by the powerful patriarchy and how slow and limited to a small number of people. It is a change that Subornolota fails to bring about in her house for all her rebelliousness, and the next generation replicate the patterns of the earlier generations. This resistance to change within the *ondormohol* mirrors the resistance within political organisations to redress the disparities in gender relationships.

The family on its part is quick to nip any radicalism in the bud. It frowns on Subornolota's attempts to inculcate a revolutionary spirit in the children. She tries to make the children aware of the subjugation of the nation to colonial

powers and instil in them a hatred for this 'slavery'. Her husband and his brothers laugh and scorn her out of such efforts. When Subornolota starts a bonfire of foreign clothes, her younger brother-in-law Probhas says in a rage, 'are we cultivating politics in this house?' Then he decides, 'she has gone mad. We need to get her treated.' (pp. 148-149). Their derision, mockery and plain opposition to Subornolota's efforts destroys any chance that she had to educate the children into engaging with issues larger than the interests of their individual selves. For the men of the household it is intolerable that a woman starts implementing her ideas about the education of children without consulting them. In fact it is little short of a rebellion to have a woman thinking and teaching the youngsters to think as well. Also talking about freedom is potentially dangerous because it can lead these sons and daughters to challenge and undermine the authority of their fathers. And that seems to be the crux of the problem. Any challenge to authority, no matter who that person in authority is, must be countered because it sets a dangerous precedent. The politics of identity that Subornolota encounters in this household works in many ways. Firstly, whenever Subornolota goes 'out of line', it is emphasised that her actions are not surprising because she is the daughter of an 'abnormal' mother. Her husband tells her, 'like mother like daughter.' (p.5). Her father says, 'the mother is somewhere and the daughter is elsewhere, yet they are cast in the same mould.' (p. 111). So Subornolota is damned because that is her inheritance as Sotyoboti's daughter. If someone's actions can be labelled as a malady or a compulsive disorder, it becomes possible to trivialise their motivation and see their actions in a different perspective; it is projected as if Subornolota cannot help herself. Also, Subornolota is continually projected as 'crazy'. Initially it is the intensity of her reactions as a young bride and her forthright nature, a characteristic trait not seen in the women of the household that leads them to label her as crazy. In effect what that meant was Subornolota did not know how to be feminine or a *meyemanush.* Gradually as she is perceived more and more as a threat to the status quo in the household, she is consciously portrayed as *pagol* (mad) to the children (to undermine her authority) and the visitors and relations. When she burns the clothes her brother-in-law says she is crazy, which diminishes the radicalism of her action and also diminishes her own status before the

children. This is a strategy to diminish the threat that she poses. Her 'madness' becomes so much a part of Subornolota's identity that even those who are well disposed towards her think of her affectionately as *pagli* (mad). Her relation, the elderly Shyamasundori tells her, 'you are my crazy daughter.' Her mother-in-law, with whom Subornolota has most of her feuds, thinks of Subornolota, when she is old and lonely, as mad but with a generous heart, while Subornolota's own children are embarrassed about their mother.

In her works Ashapurna continually explores how a woman's basic right to self-expression is compromised in the middle class Bengali household. A spirited person like Subornolota can never hope to achieve a personhood in her own right and must always be subsumed under the category of womanhood or *meyemanush.* Ashapurna's protagonists in the trilogy *Prothom Protishruti, Subornolota* and *Bokulkotha* are not trying to deny their biological sex but they resent being feminised and as a result deprived and discriminated. The author feels that their intense struggle to achieve a personhood is scarcely understood in a Bengal that was supposedly experiencing a 'renaissance'. Even daughters fail to understand their mothers' struggle for personhood. As Subornolota failed to understand Sotyoboti, Subornolota's daughters also do not understand her except little Bokul who has an insight into her mother's self when she watches her mother making a bonfire of her memoirs, the flames reflected on her burning face:

> Alarmed by the sudden burnt-paper-smell in the mute afternoon, she had gone searching from room to room before rushing up to the terrace.
> She pulled open the door and was shocked speechless.
> Over there the walls of the room on the terrace had cast its shadow. That is why even in the blinding sunlight, Suborno's face was reflecting the flames of the conflagration. In that blaze the ever-familiar face stood still and unapproachable in its alienness.
> But in every wrinkle and line on that unfamiliar face what history had been etched out?
> An intolerable struggle of a lifetime?
> Or the frustration, failure and self-loathing of a defeated soldier?
> Who knows what! (p. 451)

I think that it is quite significant that Ashapurna's protagonists Sotyoboti and Subornolota as well Bokul in *Bokulkotha*, though in a different way, are unable

to inhabit the expected feminine roles of mother and wife. Sotyoboti, a married woman and a mother, invokes fear in both her husband and her children. She is not the loving, pliable, sacrificing, tearful stereotypical wife and mother so venerated in oral and written literature. She is not devoid of emotions and in her own way cares for her husband, her two sons and daughter Subornolota, but her constant battle with her family, society, customs and traditions to establish her subjectivity rob her of the usual means to express her softer emotions. The story is repeated with Subornolota. A child bride like her mother Subornolota has her mother's clarity of thought and speech. She engages in unhesitant plain speaking, which does not endear her to a family that believes that women should never be heard. She believes in voicing her opinion about how things should be done which is again unacceptable in a family where women are meant to follow the lead provided by the men. Her constant attempts to live the life of a dignified human being, as she says, and instil in the children of the household, not merely her own children, values that she believes are essential means that she is continually on the warpath. This image of the battle-struck soldier about her persists and her husband and her children are alienated from Subornolota. Worse, her children do not identify with her visions and principles and they do not grow up to be the kind of human being that she had hoped they would be. Instead the patriarchal tradition of the household holds sway over her sons and two of her four daughters. With Bokul, Subornolota's youngest daughter, we do not see her on the warpath like her mother and her grandmother, though she too decides to forgo the roles of a wife and mother. She does not marry. What is interesting here is the pattern Ashapurna draws, of three generations of women having to 'unsex' themselves as they seek to establish their subjecthood. This 'defeminising' is present in *Nobankur* as well.

In *Nobankur* the narrative moves between the larger political struggle led by people like Odhir and the innumerable undocumented 'lesser' struggles waged by women from various segments of society against the injustices perpetrated on them. We see the struggle of Chhobi's mother Momota to educate Chhobi and to simply express her love for her daughter in a society where the birth of a daughter is cursed, just as we see the struggle of Maya, a

widow, to express her 'illegitimate' affection for Odhir when he is ailing after his prison term as a political activist. At night Momota whispers to the sleeping Chhobi,

> 'Chhobu, my darling! You are my only daughter. And yet they won't let me love you even a little bit ...' Half asleep, Chhobi realised that her mother's hand was caressing her back, her cheeks, her hair. (p. 37)

When Chhobi comes back to the village after a few years of living with her Aunt in town she gradually rejects all the supposedly feminine mores to discover herself as a person while Maya questions Odhir,

> 'So, I have stayed illiterate by choice, have I? I have had to stick like a parasite all my life to someone or the other. There were so many young men ready to save the country. Why didn't at least one of them save me and teach me to read and write?' (p. 160)

Odhir is pained by Maya's condition but he does not, indeed he cannot actually answer her query; he had been busy saving the nation while this woman's life was being ruined. Odhir becomes conscious of the numerous ways the nation needed to be saved and that the power structures that must be countered extended well beyond the colonial administration. It is probably through Lotu and Maya's life that Odhir becomes conscious of the workings of the patriarchy and how it reduces women to abject living conditions. Lotu is Odhir's sister who was driven out by her in-laws as she was dumb and not beautiful. Her parents thought her to be a burden and her mother continually cursed and asked her to die. Unloved and unwanted by everyone, the only impulse Lotu had was of hunger. Odhir for all his achievements in the sphere of nationalist politics failed to do anything to counter the injustices Lotu and Maya are subject to. As a young man he held them in contempt for their lack of strength of character and will power. When he is ill and bed-ridden, he makes an effort to understand them and their lives. When Chhobi asks him if her fate could be any different from that of Lotu pishi or Binti pishi, Odhir tells her,

> 'Why should you accept such a fate? You know what, Chhobi, I too believed once that that was how it was ordained for them. I used to watch Sukumari, Lotu, Binti - the lot of them - with such contempt. In fact, the women in our society all have to carry this yoke, they are tortured endlessly – you have to understand this and make others understand. You have to try to free yourself from such exploitation. You have to understand that if you hold other women in contempt, then you actually humiliate yourself; if you leave them behind, then you cannot go very far.' (pp. 158-159).

It is towards the end of his life, when he lies ill on his deathbed that Odhir realises that he had a responsibility towards these women and it is as important to counter the oppression that these women live with as protesting against colonial rule. There has been a shift in his political beliefs as he has moved from revolutionary activities to communism. Perhaps it is his communist activities that bring him closer to the deprived people of the village, among them the women. He now has more sympathy and understanding of their lives and struggles. Odhir notices, probably for the first time in his life, the relations of exploitation that are perpetuated through the generations in Bengali families and how they destroy the lives of the women. If as activists Odhir and others have to work with the people, it is not enough to concentrate on ending class inequalities; the revolutionary gaze must look closer, into the family and redress the misery that is the daily fare in the lives of their mothers, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers.

Odhir has not been able to do anything for Maya and he frets as to what will be her future. Thus, as part of Chhobi's education, he sends her away to meet the friends from her village school. Chhobi meets her friend Durga who had been widowed after ten months of marriage. Durga asks Chhobi, 'How long can I survive in this way? I was married for ten months only, out of which I spent only ten days with my husband. Why did everything have to end so soon for me?' (p.164). Durga's husband asked her to marry again just before he died. But Durga does not know how that can be possible. Durga expresses her despair:

> 'But what will become of me? I have to fast every new moon day, and they also make me fast on the eleventh day of the new moon. I'm not even allowed to drink water till I've done my puja in the evening. Ma weeps when

> she feels sad for me, but when she gets angry she curses me, wishing me to die. My grandmother still wears vermillion and eats fish and all I eat is boiled rice and vegetables.' (p. 164)

Durga's life is all about denial now and she resents that even as she follows all the strict regimen of widowhood. If Chhobi and Maya are overtly rebellious, Durga is a rebel-in-the-making, looking for a way out of a desiccating regimented life. As Durga requests Chhobi to find her a way to live Chhobi feels as if 'someone was slowly putting up a wall around her, stopping her from having any wishes of her own.' (p. 165). She recognizes that she had not been able to challenge this wall yet. It puts in perspective the lives of her mother, aunts, Lotu pishi and Maya, who were not even allowed to have any wish, far less being able to fulfil any. Chhobi challenges this wall soon afterwards when her foray into famine relief meets with the resentment and active opposition of her family, particularly the patriarch, her grandfather.

Her mother and *kakima* Soroswoti feel sorry for the droves of skeletal beings who gather after lunch hour for a bit of rice gruel. They give whatever is left over. For Chhobi this is not enough and when she sees a procession of people going around the village to demand famine relief, she feels compelled to join them. For her it is not rebellion at first but an expression of her concern for humanity. However her family interprets her action as a deliberate disregard for the family norms and feminine code of conduct. It is a rebellion against her grandfather and father. It is a rebellion on two counts: they are a feudal family and in taking part in the procession Chhobi is identifying with the 'other', the peasants. As a girl from a family whose women are not seen with uncovered faces in public, she has broken all taboos by walking and consorting with a group of men. When she goes to work in the relief kitchen her grandfather tries to bring her back. She refuses to leave with her grandfather, throwing a direct challenge to his authority. Eventually he is unable to bring her back and for him that signals the end of his sway over the family. He and Chhobi's father are also unable to force her into getting married. Chhobi refuses to be caged in marriage but at the cost of Shephu, her younger cousin who is married off instead. In a sense there are no easy

answers; if a Chhobi escapes patriarchal prescriptions, a Shephu is trapped. In the end for Chhobi and Maya, the political movements in the village become liberating as they are able to challenge patriarchal prescriptions and both start on a new journey of self-discovery.

Nobankur also shows the politicisation of the rural poor as does Ray's *Paka Dhaner Gan.* In *Nobankur* the famine brings the women out and for the first time they become politically conscious as do the men who till then had just followed the will of the rich landowner. While there are those like the peasant Shoshi Majhi who pick up the courage to speak back at Dokshinaronjon, the famine also makes it possible for someone like Maya, a widow spending her days as an unwelcome guest at her uncle's place, to make a break from the family and customs that treat her like a sub-human. She starts working at the relief kitchen and reading newspaper to the villagers. When her uncle locks her up so that she cannot engage in these anti-government activities, she finally breaks out, out of both her uncle's house and her regimented widow's life. After Odhir's death she decides to go to another village to work and teach among the villagers and discover if there are other ways of living. After a lifetime of suffering abuse, Maya finds her courage amongst the community of deprived people and decides to script the course of her own life. The political activists working for famine relief do not endow Maya with any new resource. However they do provide her with a community that is supportive. And it would seem that this support and encouragement is just the spur she needs to leave her old life behind and find some new meaning to her life. While working in the relief kitchen she comes to believe in herself and sees herself as something better than a creature who is fated to suffer abuse just for a handful of food and shelter. An improved self-esteem enables her to start on a new course.

Like Ashapurna's protagonists Sulekha Sanyal's Chhobi is a defeminised rebel figure right from her childhood. If she escapes the fate of her childhood friends like Basonti, Uma and Durga, some of it is due to her rejection of the accepted notion of what it is to be a girl. There seems to be a suggestion in the works of both these authors that if women are to experience any sort of

liberty they have to reject the socially sanctioned trappings of femininity. It is at the same time not a rejection of emotions as we see Chhobi falling in love with Tomal in *Nobankur* and Shompa, Bokul's niece, with Sotyoban in *Bokulkotha.* The premise seems to be that the traditional notion of the feminine cannot co-exist with the desire for personhood amongst Bengali women. The authors here are not trying to essentialise what a 'woman' is but only suggesting that women have to forgo softer emotions that are typically identified as feminine when striving for freedom of a kind. Here it is worth recalling how women were encouraged to join the Civil Disobedience movement. Critics like Gail Minault have noted that the nationalist cause was seen as an extension of the familial responsibility that women bore in their daily lives, as the nation was identified with the extended family.[137] In other words it was their femininity, women's natural, nurturing role as wives and mothers that was being put to the use of the cause of freeing the nation. From the perspective of the protagonists of Ashapurna and Sulekha Sanyal's works engaged in the 'lesser' struggle of liberating themselves, this attempt of the nationalist movement to reiterate, protect and reinforce the feminine identity of the female political workers seems rather ironical. On the contrary, their works imply that the urge for freedom of any kind cannot co-exist with any wifely or maternal role that has been historically and culturally antithetical to the notion of liberation. Ashapurna Devi and Sulekha Sanyal expose the double standards practised by a nationalist movement that abjectly failed to bring even a semblance of dignity to the lives of these women. So when women's participation in the nationalist movement is solicited in the guise of extending and expanding their conventional role-playing, the novels indicate that we have reason to be sceptical of the kind of freedom that will bring.

The stirrings of political consciousness

The two primary sites that led Bengali women into the political sphere in the 1930s and 40s were the home and the educational institute. At home either

[137] Gail Minault, *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1981), pp. 10-15. Minault explains that Gandhi asked Indians to turn their weakness into strength by exercising moral force against British governmental power. He gave the example of women in the patriarchal extended family who knew how to 'turn their subordinate position into one of strength and influence through the exercise of moral suasion' (*Young India*, April 10, 1930).

the father or grandfather or some male member of the large joint family would be a sympathiser or an active member of some political or revolutionary group. Their involvement meant that the ideas of the group were being disseminated in the house among the family members, which included the women from the *ondormohol.* We know of the involvement of Ujjala Majumdar's landowner father in the revolutionary movement that must certainly have inspired young Ujjala. He actually used her as a courier once, when she was fourteen.[138] For Kalyani and Bina Das, their parents were deeply idealistic and committed to the idea of a free nation that not only inspired them but also Subhash Chandra Bose. Kalyani's father Benimadhab Das was Subhash's teacher at Cuttack Ravenshaw Collegiate School.[139] For Jyotirmoyi Ganguly the inspiration came from her parents Dwarakanath and Kadambini Ganguly who were not only committed social activists but also political activists associated with the Congress.[140]

In many families the men, while not active politically, were sympathisers with the nationalist movement and supported it by such indirect means as using *khoddor* and other *swodeshi* goods. For instance Mira Duttagupta's father was actually a senior government official but the family did not use any foreign goods in the house.[141] Lila Nag's father and grandfather were civil servants but the family boycotted foreign clothes and mourned the death of martyr Khudiram Bose by fasting.[142] Similarly in Pritilata Waddedar's family use of foreign goods was prohibited though her father was not actively involved in the freedom struggle.[143] Renu Sen was brought up by her grandparents who narrated to her the shameful history of India's subjection to foreign rule, which inspired in her nationalistic feelings.[144] Evidently the impact of the family in the lives of these women cannot be discounted and their initiation into the political sphere took place at home. Here we also ought to keep in mind many other

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[138] Kamala Dasgupta, *Swadhinota Songrame Banglar Nari* (Calcutta: Jayasri Prakasan, 1989), p.139.
[139] *Ibid.* , p.87.
[140] *Ibid.* , p.56.
[141] *Ibid.* , p.256.
[142] *Ibid.* , p.81.
[143] Kalpana Dutta in an interview in Kanak Mukhopadhyay (ed.) *Somokaler Prekkhapote Pritilata Waddedar* (Calcutta: Women's Studies Centre, Jadavpur University, 1999), p.62.
[144] Dasgupta, p.168.

women like Nanibala Devi, Dukadibala Devi, Khirodasundari Choudhury, Bishnupriya Devi, Matangini Hajra[145] whose foray into the political arena was fortuitous. They were all ordinary middle class housewives and in many cases widows who had a chance encounter with a political activist or revolutionary which subsequently changed the course of their lives. The query that arises here is how did the family and society permit these women into what was quite unequivocally a male domain?

One possible answer is that it was an emotionally charged time when people at large were being called to join in the anti-colonial movement. The euphoria of the moment made it possible for many young girls to become a part of the nationalist movement. The call from someone like Gandhi who had been christened the Mahatma also made it that much easier for women to participate. Indeed Gandhi's fatherly and desexualised public image and charisma went a long way in making female political activism acceptable. The Gandhian mode of agitation that did not compromise the femininity of the women made it possible for women to enter the political arena. Activities such as spinning on the *charkha*, or social reconstructive work in *ashrams* and associations fell within the ambit of respectability for most families and women did not have to face any resistance for such work. An interesting case is that of widows. This is one class of women in Bengali society who live with the most strictures and the slightest deviation from the straight path would jeopardise both their life and living. However we find quite a few instances of widows participating in the nationalist movements. How did it become possible for women who led such regimented lives to step out into the public realm? It seems that families and society which always found it difficult to accommodate the widow found the nationalist sphere was an area where their energies could be used and the service of the nation would sublimate their dangerous sexuality. The kind of activity that they engaged in was actually not quite regarded as political but rather as service to the nation that made their political activity acceptable. In Bengal there was also the strong pull of the revolutionary ideal and many women whose family had one or more male

[145] *Ibid.*, pp. 36-40, 41-42, 43-45, 214-215, 227-232.

members who were revolutionaries quite naturally embraced the revolutionary ideal.

The other site that infused the seed of political activism in Bengali women was the educational institution. Irrespective of their background, in school and college they came into a world that was fertile with all kinds of ideas and ideologies. Institutions like Bethune and Diocesan in Calcutta, Dr. Khastagir's School in Barisal, Faizunnessa School in Comilla, Eden and Dipali School in Dhaka were places where many girls were initiated into the political movements. There were scores of girls who got involved with Lila Nag's Dipali Sangha while in school in Dhaka, while in Calcutta, Kalyani Das got together with Surama Mitra and Kamala Dasgupta to form the Chhatri Sangha whose illustrious members were Pritilata, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutt, Suhasini Ganguly, Ila Sen and Sulata Kar among many others. All of these women along with Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Lila Nag were also alumni of Bethune.[146] It is not surprising that educational institutes functioned as hotbeds of political activism among the female student community because this was the one public space that they had access to as well as the people who wanted to recruit them. The ones who were recruited from the schools and colleges were more likely to decide their course of action independently and we find that many of these women pursued some profession, which also made it possible for them to follow their political inclination untrammelled.

One of Sabitri Roy's earliest novels *Trisrota* is a work that tries to portray the complex political affiliations of the people at that time. One of the main protagonists Podma experiences a variety of influences in the shape of her Gandhian grandfather, her revolutionary uncle and her communist husband and friend. Podma never becomes an insider in the communist party while continuing to help her husband in certain ways. She is torn between the various allegiances of all these people who are dear to her. She experiences the dilemma as to what was the right path or if there was a right path at all. As Tanika Sarkar reminds us in her foreword to a translation of *Paka Dhaner*

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[146] Dasgupta, *Swadhinota Songrame Banglar Nari.*

Gan, 'Roy herself had lifelong exchanges with multiple political formations. She grew up in the middle of heady anti-colonial civil disobedience movements that Gandhians led, she had close relations with revolutionary terrorists within her own family, some of whom later followed Subhas Chandra Bose's political trajectory of a war against British imperialism with Japanese aid. She chose to marry a communist who had moved away from a life of the revolutionary terrorist and who spurned the dedication to Bose's path that several members of her own family espoused.'[147] The cross-currents of different political ideologies worked in different ways in the lives of different women. For Podma, it is difficult to choose between one and the other as she sympathises with the aims of the different groups. She has grown up in a Gandhian atmosphere with her grandparents and aunt. She respects their spartan lifestyle, their social commitment and the ashram that they run and their impeccable ethical values. She is also appreciative of the zeal and patriotism of her uncle and brother. While their position is diametrically opposite from that of her grandparents, she intuitively understands that there is nothing false or hollow in their belief and spirit of sacrifice.

When she comes into contact with the brother-sister duo of Orunabho and Bipasha and witnesses their work among the industrial slums, she holds their work in great esteem. However, as a result of occupying a middle ground between all these divergent strands of political thought and action, a kind of political paralysis occurs in Podma's life. She is a sympathiser but she is also an outsider for all these men in her life. She wants to be an insider, especially where the communists are concerned, because Orunabho, her husband is a communist but she is unable to accept this as the only way of thought and work, to the exclusion of all others. She blames Orunabho for not making her his comrade, but perhaps it is as much her inability as Orunabho's indifference regarding her involvement. At the same time Bipasha embraces communism unhesitatingly, suffering none of the torment that Podma experiences. *Trisrota* also provides a brief glimpse of the life of the industrial proletariat living in the slums mushrooming in the metropolis of Calcutta, just

[147] Tanika Sarkar, 'Foreword' in *Harvest Song*, p. vii.

as *Sworolipi* portrays the refugee colonies coming up in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1947. In these works we see the politicisation of the entire people who found themselves in a position where they had to organise themselves to find shelter, safety and food for themselves and their families. We are witness to women who did not know much beyond their home and the village pond attending meetings, going on strikes and marches with their children in tow. The political organisations provided a base for some of these people and in turn strengthened their own power base. In *Sworolipi* Sabitri Roy suggests that the right wing Hindu political organisations tried to capitalise on the trauma and anger of the Hindu refugees and create communally partisan voters. While some of the communist party workers were working hard to help the refugees build up their colonies with basic civic amenities, the right-wing Hindu political groups were aggravating communal passions by engineering communal violence. Some women along with the men of the household gravitated towards Hindu political organisations but a large section of women went along with the communist workers in their refugee rehabilitation programmes. While the communist Rothi's sister Urmi's neighbours in the refugee colony believe in a Hindu unity, Urmi, Promila, Khetromoni, Tulsi's young widow support communist programme that does not discriminate between refugees.

In *Sworolipi* the educational establishments are the epicentres of communist organisational activity. Many party members are teachers in schools and colleges and their activities politicise the student community as well. There is the incident of a school boy being shot by the police and Comrade Sumitra cradles his head as he lies dying. In *Trisrota* also Roy narrates an incident where a schoolboy is shot dead while participating in a procession. These incidents suggest the politicisation of the educational sphere. While to what extent there was recruitment of students into the various political parties cannot be estimated, it can certainly be assumed that educational institutions were breeding grounds for political activists, both students and teachers. In *Sworolipi* most of the female characters teach in schools and colleges, along with some of the male characters.

Sworolipi is one of the most political of Roy's novels. Here Roy portrays the workings of the communist party and its relation to women workers and sympathisers. Among Roy's three novels *Trisrota, Sworolipi* and *Paka Dhaner Gan* where her narrative is based on the communist movement, it is in *Sworolipi* that we find women as party members. They are few in number and most of the other women are sympathisers. For the women the experience of working for the party is exhilarating while also stifling. Working for a cause provides them the opportunity to find a way out of the drudgery that characterise the lives of most middle class women but at the same time the political sphere does not allow them to think or voice their opinions. While the party may require 'disciplined soldiers', for the women it is another hierarchical set of relationships where they are expected to carry out orders even when they have doubts about it. Perhaps the most damaging aspect for women is their 're-sexualisation' in the party. They break through the sex stereotypes to join the party in its revolutionary class struggle, only to find that the leadership has once again typecast them into auxiliary 'feminine' roles. The leadership is quite clearly male. Men give the speeches that are referred to in the novel, the party officials in the higher echelons are men and those coordinating the party activities at the grassroots level are generally men. At the grassroots level there are a few women in position of power like Nondita and Sagori but that is all.

Women workers get together and discuss about implementing strikes, take part in marches and write pamphlets and posters. While many of these communist women lived more unconventional lives than most (some of them lived in communes), as workers they are given peripheral roles. We see only men in the railway strike and in the organisation of the *Tebhaga Andolon.* Sagori goes into the *Tebhaga* areas but that is on her own initiative, not the party's. Someone like Shita works hard in the school and then supports her family and her parents. She struggles financially and otherwise to meet these responsibilities but the party is indifferent to these personal struggles. The impression is that like in their traditional roles as wives and mothers, even in the party organisation women are expected to play mute supportive roles uncomplainingly. Then there is also the story of Sagori who was a bright and

promising party activist. This tale depicts the dark side of the party that had become a top-heavy organisation with almost no pretensions to democracy. When Sagori's husband Rothi disagrees with the party leadership he is expelled from the party and Sagori is also asked to sever her relations with her husband as a dedicated worker. Probably to prove her commitment to the party as a worker and also to prove that she was not a weak woman, Sagori does not question the right of the party to dictate her personal life and separates from Rothi. When she is asked to work with the person who is one of the top leaders of the party Sagori is thrilled. She thinks that this a reward for her good work earlier. She starts work as a translator. For the party leader she is an intelligent and attractive woman. When she is asked to divorce Rothi because the leader fancies her, Sagori is shattered to realise that she is merely a sexual object in that office. This novel that so graphically portrayed the maladies that had beset the communist party was banned. The critique of the party in this novel by Roy obviously cut deep and Roy's husband was asked to persuade Roy to withdraw the novel. When she refused to do so, it was banned. According to Sujit Ghosh, Roy then resigned from the party membership.[148]

The novel also illustrates the patriarchal characterisation of women as impediments on the revolutionary path. The relationship of Prithwi and Shita comes apart because Prithwi reckons that Shita will tie him to domesticity and he will have to give up all his revolutionary ideals. Prithwi is a liberal, enlightened and sensitive individual. Yet in his last letter to Shita from prison he writes, 'I do not want that my personal desire should smother my great ideal. I cannot disregard the call of millions of people for one loving nest. I wish you a happy life within your home.' (p. 7). In his mind he has allocated domestic bliss or drudgery for Shita. Even after seven years of imprisonment when he learns about Shita, her wedding, her motherhood and her undying love for him, he continues to believe that he did right in severing his ties with her. Yet at the same time when he meets his female comrades he thinks that Shita could have made her place beside them working for the cause of the

[148] Sujit Ghosh, 'Introduction' in Sabitri Roy, *Sworolipi* (Calcutta: Ratna Prakasan, 1992), p. iii.

deprived people. When he learns that Shita's husband has passed away he thinks he was mistaken in his lack of confidence in Shita's strength. He feels sorry that when women like Sumitra are taking firm steps forward in the struggle for social justice, Shita is trapped and crushed in the binds of widowhood. Prithwi underestimates Shita's resilience and spirit even here. She joins the communist movement on her own initiative and sheds the trappings of a Hindu widow's life to work and bring up her daughter. Not only does she become the proverbial harbour to her daughter but also to her mother-in-law, parents and even to Prithwi when the party expels him. Shita's strength of character is revealed when she hides comrades on the run in her in-laws' house in East Pakistan. She is there alone with her little daughter looking after her dying mother-in-law. When the communal riots begin she shelters the Hindu families of the village. When she finally leaves by boat to come back to India after the death of her mother-in-law, she agrees to take a political activist on boat conscious of the danger to herself as a woman, a Hindu and a communist. The police stop her boat and the activist and she are both arrested. She could not have been unaware of the vicious treatment of the arrested communists by the government in East Pakistan but still she takes what is for her an ethical and political decision to help a comrade. Prithwi's gradually changing perception of women's role in political activism is revealed in his encouragement of his younger sister Kuri in her political work. He helps her to do the posters and is supportive when she wants to be with and nurse fellow comrade Pholgu. When Kuri is arrested while marching in a procession Prithwi feels proud of her. He is arrested soon afterwards and the brother and sister greet each other from their cells raising clenched fists. Prithwi can now easily accept Kuri's political involvement and does not wish for her a life within the walls of the home as he had for Shita.

The two sisters in *Sworolipi,* Sagori and Sumitra, are the daughters of Gandhian parents. Thus they grow up on Gandhian idealism. However when their parents die they come under other influences and eventually embrace the communist ideology. For someone like Prithwi's sister Kuri, political indoctrination begins at home. Initially she assists her brother and his friends, gradually getting sucked into the vortex of the *andolon.* For Shita her political

journey begins when she goes to teach and Rothi and his sisters are her neighbours. They come to her for donation to the party fund and she gradually gets drawn into the movement. When she learns that Prithwi is also a member of the group, she is further interested as Prithwi was her father's student. For someone like Shita's mother Promila, the political impulse comes late in life when she comes to West Bengal as a refugee from East Pakistan. Having lost everything and been subject to indifference and oppression by the state and police she starts going to meetings and participating in processions. Her support for the communists is not simply a result of her two children's, Pholgu and Shita's involvement in the communist movement. It comes from her fierce sense of struggle to protect her precarious shelter, a house built of mud and *hogla* leaves. In *Trisrota*, Podma also grows up in a nationalist household and attends a school run by her grandfather. This is a complex novel where Roy depicts the various ideologies and groups in circulation and how they affected politically conscious families. In this family we find the older generation steeped in Gandhian nationalism while the younger generation are veering towards Subhash Bose's brand of political agitation, or towards communism or other revolutionary ideals. We find Podma caught up in a maelstrom of ideologies unable to understand if there is one right path and why there should be such fissures if the goal is the same. In Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur* Chhobi has twin influences acting on her young mind, that of her uncle Odhir and then that of her school and her teacher Sudha. The case of Chhobi also confirms the relevance of the feminist credo that the personal is political. As the young Chhobi ventures into the realm of nationalist politics she finds she has to first of all confront the politics of gender at home and in society to make it possible for her and other girls to pursue a calling that carries conviction.

Sabitri Roy's novels are teeming with politically active women. However their struggle is not just in the public realm but a more painful battle is waged daily in the private sphere of the home and family. Her novel *Paka Dhaner Gan* spans over a period of about ten years, through the late thirties till around 1946 when the *Tebhaga Andolon* was in full swing. Politics pervade every sphere of living in this novel, even when the women are not directly involved in the movements. In Partho's village, there is the constant struggle of the

villagers and the peasants against the exploitative measures of the landlord. They work hard on the fields but most of the harvest goes to the landlord and the family goes hungry and the peasant sinks deeper into debts. Since the debts are taken from the landlord, in lieu of interest more and more of the produce end up in the landlord's granary initiating a vicious circle of debt and repayment. The villagers are also harassed by the constant demand for taxes levied on just any pretext. The middle class Hindu women in the villages are not part of the resistance though they also suffer from exploitation and attacks of the landlords. The situation is different in the tribal villages where Partho goes to work. Here the women are much more active and militant and work together with the men to counter the militia of the landlord and the police. In *Sworolipi* Sabitri Roy also portrays a tribal woman Radha as one of the leaders of the Tebhaga movement in the Hajong areas.

Urban women like Bhodra and Lota in *Paka Dhaner Gan* are not directly involved in political activities in the sense that they are not members of any political outfit. They are however keenly aware of the political realities and are sympathisers of the communist movement and its vision of social and economic justice. Lota is brought up in her Aunt's ashram. Her Aunt is a nationalist and runs a school for girls. Lota imbibes her political consciousness here. She also has the opportunity to meet with people like Partho and Sulokkhon, who are revolutionaries-turned-communists and they further the growth of her political consciousness by supplying her with revolutionary and communist literature. Later when she is living in the village after marrying Sulokkhon, she undertakes to work with the women and children by starting a *samiti* (organisation) where the women are taught crafts that will enable them to earn a living and also undertakes a literacy programme for children. It is a programme of upliftment for the women and children of the village, while also raising their consciousness about the political situation and economic exploitation. At the same time she is also waging a battle against the family norms and social customs that had compelled a widowed daughter-in-law in the family to commit suicide and another daughter-in-law to run away. Lota perceives that her political work has to be at the level of families and relationships so that the oppressed and

exploited people are able to have a better life. The novel shows that while class inequalities and exploitation are visible, the insidious patriarchal politics within the private sphere of the home are not as easily visible nor regarded as important enough to wage a battle about. In the case of Bhodra, she is a widow who lives with her old father-in-law. Bhodra's initiation into the political sphere is not clear but her interaction with Partho, the tenant, opens up a new world for her as she translates revolutionary articles into Hindi from Bengali. Gradually she gets more and more involved with activities like running a milk canteen for poor children when the second world war comes to Indian borders and then finally with the peasant struggle. Being a widow and her own guardian despite the presence of her old father-in-law, Bhodra manages to carve a niche for herself. She writes and translates articles for the periodicals after her school hours and is her own mistress.

For Lota it is different in an unsympathetic household. Her step mother-in-law is continually looking for ways to make her life difficult and her husband is away frequently. When her son is born she finds it difficult to make ends meet. Sulokkhon has the party machinery and comrades in his war against the exploitative *jotdars* and hoarders, while Lota is a lonely soldier. There is simply no support structure for her and if she wants her husband to be around because their son is ill, party members like Botu accuse her of not being a fit wife for a communist. As a wife she is expected to play a supportive role uncomplainingly and assist her husband and the party in every way. Sulokkhon, even though he is a loving and caring husband, does not think it necessary to ask her or discuss with her before venturing on his dangerous missions nor does the party think that it needs to provide her material support when her husband is away. Lota is supportive of the struggle that Sulokkhon is engaged in but despairs when she cannot feed her son properly or send money to her old aunt. She is also somebody who is kept on the margins of the movements. For all her sacrifices and support, the comrades do not discuss issues with her, not even her husband. For the activists she is simply there to provide them with food and tea. In all of Sabitri Roy's novels women perform the important task of feeding the comrades. In *Sworolopi* Kuri cooks for the comrades when they gather for a meeting at her house and supply

them with tea every hour. When they leave she clears the cigarette stubs and ashes and the used cups and plates. Similarly Shita keeps food ready for Pholgu and his friends who might arrive on a short notice and ask to be fed. These men do not realise how difficult it is for the women to feed them in their straitened circumstances. Lota finds it difficult to give her son Daku even two square meals a day and Shita's daughter Mithu goes hungry when Shita just does not have enough money to buy food grains. The activists accept the food as matter of course from their sisters, wives, and friends without enquiring too deeply how they are affording everything. They are more appreciative of the efforts of the peasants to feed them when they go to the rural areas to work with them. It is an ideological myopia that is deeply disturbing in Ray's novels. Shita thinks, 'Pholgu and his friends do not know, do not bother to find out how much ugliness exists in this metropolis – in every family - even in his sister's affectionate home.' (p. 113). The political consciousnesses of the activists do not extend to the home where most women spend most of their lives. Ray's novels continually draw this contrast. She is appreciative of the work of the activists where they risk everything for the cause of a just and equitable social order but they are blind to the patriarchal machinations within the home that make living unbearable for many women. It would seem that they are even complicit in this system, expecting that women's lives should be geared towards assisting them in their ventures. It is another way of perpetuating the stereotypical 'female' role as providers of services.

One character who is deeply unhappy and resents her provider role is Deboki. She is a village girl from an impoverished family but dreams of a different life. She looks up to Partho, respects him for his selflessness and his dedication to the cause of the nation's independence but is also disappointed in his inability to see and do something about her traumatised life. He creates an opportunity for her to make something of herself when he arranges for her to go to school. Deboki is excited and does well in Ishani Debi's school, when her father arrives to take her back to be married. Deboki asks Partho to help her escape this fate and he fails her. He cannot convince her father to let her continue her studies and all he can say to Deboki is, 'I don't think I shall see you again. I

just hope and pray that you'll be happy.' (p. 42). He meets her once again when Deboki comes to her parents for the duration of her pregnancy. He asks her how she is. Deboki does not reply. When he meets Deboki next time Deboki's son has been taken away from her and Partho hears about how her husband had subjected her to regular beatings and how she had been driven out of the house as a woman of 'loose' morals. She had written a letter to Partho and her husband had confiscated that letter. That was the root of the slander. Partho is amazed that Deboki had said nothing about all the abuse that she had experienced when he had seen her on the previous occasion. Deboki realises that she has to take the course of her life in her own hands. Partho, the person who she had relied on to save her from this violent abusive life, cannot or will not do anything. She leaves for Calcutta to find a job and look after herself as it becomes impossible to live in the village. Partho on the other hand, while he appreciates Sarothi, when the tribal peasant resolves that he will get his childhood beloved Soroswoti out of her unhappy marriage and marry her, is unable to do anything to release Deboki from her abusive marriage. Deboki goes on to struggle some more in Calcutta and finally finds herself a job as a nurse in a tuberculosis hospital. In the hospital as a member of the nurse's union she joins in a collective struggle for better wages and conditions of work. Deboki comes a long way from a young abused housewife to an efficient nurse able to demand her rights. Partho or any political organisation has no part to play in Deboki's fight for survival and her self-definition and growth. A middle class woman's violent abuse and the destruction of all her possibilities are not deemed to be important issues by political activists and they fail her time and again. It is only when she takes charge of her life that she is able to turn things around.

The relationship: Bengali women and political movements

In historical documents we find that the innovative nature of female political participation notwithstanding, the concern with gender roles remained in society and within the political establishment. Society did not take kindly to women who they felt had transgressed even if for the cause of the nation. Here I refer to the case of Nanibala Devi who had the honour of being the only female state prisoner in Bengal. Nanibala was married early and widowed by

the time she was sixteen. She got involved in the revolutionary movement through a nephew-by-relation, Amarendra Chatterjee. She undertook the risk of hiding a couple of absconding revolutionaries disguising herself as a householder. Her next action was even more daring. She went to meet a revolutionary in the prison dressed as his wife to find out where he had hidden a pistol before being arrested. For these and more activities of this nature the police started looking for her. At this point she convinced her childhood friend's brother to take her with him to Peshawar where she was eventually arrested. These activities were unthinkable for any Bengali woman at the time, even more so for a widow. She was stripped and tortured in the prison cell and at one point she slapped the Intelligence Bureau special superintendent Goldie for insulting her. When this extraordinary woman was released from prison she found she had nowhere to go. No relation or friend was willing to take her in. She spent the rest of her life in a miserable house, in poverty but with dignity.[149] While not everyone suffered this fate, accommodating such women back in society after their actions were done proved to be a problem. When we examine the entries in *Swadhinota Songrame Banglar Nari* we find that most of the women shed their political role just before independence or after, and joined the mainstream. For example someone like Latika Ghosh almost completely dissociated herself from politics after 1935, retired from her academic service in 1962 and lived for another twenty years till 1983.[150] Others continued their education and joined in the various professions that were opening out for women at this time, like the brave young revolutionary Suniti who shot the District Magistrate of Comilla, Stevens.[151] Still others continued their social-reconstruction activities. The women affiliated to the communist movement remained committed to the peasant struggle while also organising themselves to work amongst the refugees after Partition. It would be interesting to probe into the possible reasons why most women abandoned the political sphere in independent

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[149] Kamala Dsagupta, *Swadhinota Songrame Banglar Nari*, pp. 36-40.
[150] Dasgupta, p.62.
[151] Sunil Sen, *The Working Women and Popular Movements in Bengal: From the Gandhian Era to the Present Day* (Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi & Company, 1985), p. 104. Among those active in the Students' and Women's Movements, Dr. Ila Basu, Dr. Alaka Chatterjee among others also left politics to take up other professions. Like Suniti Chaudhuri, Ila Basu also became a doctor, while Alaka Chatterjee became a College lecturer.

India, but first we need to explore how the political parties reacted to women workers.

In an interview taken on behalf of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay reveals how Gandhi did not want to involve women in the Salt Satyagraha programme saying that he had in mind some special mission for them. It was on Kamala's insistence that he made a special appeal to women to come forward and participate. He was convinced that women would not come forward. Proving him wrong and Kamala Devi right, large number of women joined the Civil Disobedience movement. This was the first time such large numbers of women became involved in the political agitation for their country's freedom.

During this time in Bengal we see some women involved in the movement for the political freedom of the country, others working in the agrarian movement, while still others, fewer in number, were involved in the trade union movements. The Congress, which was the primary party involved in the political battle with the British, brought into its fold educated, urban middle class women like Renuka Ray, Phulrenu Guha, Jyotirmoyi Ganguly, Sucheta Kripalani, Ashoka Gupta and so on. In her memoirs Renuka Ray recalls how they went to listen to Gandhi as students and were so moved by his request to sacrifice for the cause of the nation that she gave up the golden bangles that she was wearing .[152] However as critics like Karuna Chanana[153] and Sujata Patel[154] have noted Gandhi really carried mixed messages for women. Women had a duty to the nation but their duties to their families, husband and children took precedence over the national duty. If we look at the core-working

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[152] Interview with Renuka Ray, Oral History Transcripts, NMML, New Delhi. Also in *My Reminiscences,* p. 29.

[153] Karuna Ahmed Chanana, 'Gandhi, Women's Roles and The Freedom Movement', Occasional Papers, NMML, New Delhi, undated.

[154] Sujata Patel, 'Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi', Occasional Papers, NMML, New Delhi, undated. Also see Madhu Kishwar, *Gandhi and Women* (New Delhi: Manushi Prakashan, 1986). Madhu Kishwar indicates the ambiguity inherent in Gandhi's conception of women when she says that even though Gandhi 'was aware that among other things, oppression is not an abstract moral condition, but a social and historical experience related to production relations, he tried to change women's position without transforming their relation to either the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction.' (p. 28)

group of the Congress it becomes clear how women were kept on the margins when it came to the real power politics. Even a stalwart figure like Sarojini Naidu was made to appear as an ornamental, colourful figure who was essentially a poet, by laying stress on her image as the 'nightingale' of India. Such strategies have always been used to take the sting out of a radical personality. From the personal papers of Aruna Asaf Ali we also learn of the problems this very independent and brave woman had with Gandhi and how the Congress attempted to cut her down to size after the Quit India movement.[155]

With the revolutionaries, their revolution did not always extend to gender roles. For a long time women merely played roles like hiding arms and assisting revolutionaries who were on the run from the police. Gradually they were given more responsibilities. Pramila Das recounts how the revolutionaries needed the service of young girls like her because the strict police vigilance made it very difficult for boys and young men to carry on their activities.[156] As far as the attitude of the revolutionary parties toward gender roles was concerned, it can be gauged from the fact that when Lila Nag took over the leadership of the *Sree Sangha* after its leader Anil Ray was arrested, the party split down the middle as there were many men who could not accept the leadership of a woman. In the case of the Communist party, which along with the *Kisan Sabhas* (peasant organisations) led the agrarian revolt in Bengal, they had many women workers who worked tirelessly and with great success during the famine, *Tebhaga Andolon* and the refugee crisis. In a speech reported by *Jonojuddho* on September 2, 1943 party leader Adhikari[157] acknowledges that the participation of women in the movement has been spontaneous; the party had made no effort to organise the spontaneous movement and to spread among the mass of women. Yet in an infamous speech in Netrokona P.C.Joshi berated the women workers of the

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[155] Private papers of Aruna Asaf Ali, Oral History Transcripts, NMML, New Delhi.
[156] Pramila Das, 'Obismoroniyo' in Kanak Mukhopadhyay (ed.), *Somokaler Prekkhapote Pritilata Waddedar*, p.68.
[157] Custers, p. 183. Adhikari says: 'Only in the branch of the CPI in Bengal there are many women, and this shows the strength of the Party and the movement in Bangladesh'. He commends the heroism and courage of women in various working class strikes and concedes that women's initiative has come without any organising effort by the Party.

party for failing to integrate with the oppressed women, after they had ensured the success of the rural programmes.[158] The figures actually state that the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* (MARS), the organisation started by the Marxist women in the wake of the famine, had 390 primary committees and a registered membership of 43,500 in 1944.[159] There were also a couple of women who worked with great success in the trade unions like Prabhabati Dasgupta, Santosh Kumari, Sakina Mayuzzada, Sudha Roy and Maitreyee Bose.

Politicisation of Bengali women: a balance sheet

So what was the outcome of the politicisation of Bengali middle class women? The Indian political scenario was not quite willing to accommodate political women even as late as in the 1960s. From letters written to Sucheta Kripalani, as the Secretary of the Women's Department of the AICC, where women complain of lack of representation in the elections to the Provincial Legislative Assembly[160] to the letter written by Mrs. Muthulakshmi Reddi in November 1936[161] where she writes of women in the Madras Presidency not being given due representation in the Provincial Assembly elections, the marginalisation of women in politics has been a recurring feature in pre- and post-colonial India This attitude is not limited to the Congress. In her autobiography Manikuntala Sen writes how she was the only female candidate to be fielded by the Communist party in the first general elections in 1952.[162] The statistics for the 1952 elections show that only 10% of all contestants were women and they formed 37% of the winning candidates.[163] Bagendu Ganguly notes that an examination of the papers from 1952 show that a considerable number of women joined the pre-election meetings in West Bengal; they were also enthusiastic participants in meetings convened specially for them. In fact the urban areas saw as many women as men canvassing for the different

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[158] Manikuntala Sen, pp.145-147.
[159] Custers, pp. 57-58.
[160] *Ibid.*
[161] Papers of Hansa Mehta, Forbes Collection, European Manuscripts, IOL.
[162] Manikuntala Sen, p. 219.
[163] Nandini Upreti and D.B.Mathur, 'Women Voters and The Mid-Term Poll: A Study of Attitudes, Awareness and Commitments' in Vina Mazumdar (ed), *Symbols of Power*, p.33.

candidates.[164] This is definitely indicative of the political consciousness of Bengali women many of whom would have been adversely affected by the partition of the country. The question remains however what changes did this political consciousness bring about in their lives or in the lives of those who were members of the various political groups?

Firstly, the wave of politicisation meant the awakening of a consciousness of an entity that was much larger than the individual and his or her surroundings. For Bengali women politicisation introduced them to the notion of the nation. Situated wherever they were, for a Bengali woman in early twentieth century Bengal, with her limited or no education, her circumscribed life which might well have not extended beyond the perimeter of one village, imagining the nation as a geographical, cultural and political entity would not come naturally. As Sulekha Sanyal has so deftly illustrated in *Nobankur* in the incident where Chhobi sets out to go to school on the day of the *hartal,* for a little girl like Chhobi it is difficult to understand what a nation is and consequently what the significance of the *hartal* is. We see that even Sukumari is not quite aware of the strike or its implications. However, the strike and the fact that Chhobi landed in the midst of the picketing of the school gates by the political activists, helps Chhobi to understand better the idea of nation, of colonialism and of the struggle for independence. Similarly for the village girl Deboki, a sudden encounter with Partho who is a revolutionary on the run from the police creates this vague sensation of a cause much greater than anything she has known for which one could sacrifice one's life. When Partho hands her a pistol, requesting her to hide it, she feels responsible and a part of something grand and noble. For Bhodra also, when she is told that she is needed for a cause, it takes her out of the pettiness of daily living and connects her to a great mission. Bhodra is of course an educated woman, a teacher and to a certain extent politically aware. But the involvement in a larger social programme makes her palpably aware of an ideal and a cause like never before, drawing her away from her unfruitful and tragic marital relationship and her widowhood. All these women experience a definite

[164] Bagendu Ganguly, 'Profiles of Women in West Bengal' in Vina Mazumdar (ed.), *Symbols of Power,* p. 327.

broadening of their consciousness when they are introduced to the concept of the nation or that of social and economic justice. Their circumscribed existence is suddenly opened to a panoramic vista leading to an appreciable growth of their mental world. These characters start perceiving themselves as part of something that is far greater than their individual self. This growing consciousness also enables them to identify a larger playing field for themselves as women. They perceive that their life may not be limited to the *ondormohol* and the kitchen, bearing and rearing children and cooking food, that there is a wider arena where they can contribute whatever resources and skills that they have. For Chhobi this takes the shape of famine relief work as it does for Maya. Bhodra writes and translates for the peasants' newspaper and finally goes out to work among the peasants themselves.

Secondly, politicisation also introduced Bengali women to a new range of vocabulary. From their birth they are conditioned to internalise notions of fate and destiny, acceptance and adjustment, patience, duty and so on. The political movements introduced them to the alien concepts of agitation, demands, rights, exploitation, and oppression among others. Deboki has been taught since childhood that as a girl she had to accept gratefully whatever she got, to suffer patiently and to bear with whatever was meted out to her by her husband and in-laws. After a point Deboki decides that she was not going to put up with the abuse that she had been subjected to by her husband and in-laws. Her father Dinonath has a meagre income and struggles to support his family but Deboki comes back nevertheless. She doesn't use the word abuse or exploitation but she is aware of the concept and that she should not or need not put up with it. Unlike her elder sister-in-law who suffers silently and then commits suicide, Deboki courageously breaks away which was quite unusual for a girl belonging to an impoverished and conservative family. Similarly Maya who has suffered from the harsh treatment of her aunt all her adult life combats the officer with an amazing spirit when he tells her that she cannot read the newspaper to the people coming to the relief kitchen. Maya argues that they are well within their rights because the newspaper had not been banned. They will also sing songs and hold meetings because even though the government belonged to the British the country is theirs.

The political movements also provided the women with new tools to fight with. The nurses in the tuberculosis hospital where Deboki works get together to hold meetings for increase in wages in keeping with the rise in the prices of essential commodities during the war. They know that it will be a long drawn affair where they have to continually place their demand before the administration, without fear of refusal or reprisal. These nurses are not radical political activists or connected to any political organisation. However the general atmosphere of politicisation and the formation of trade unions in the various industries must certainly have influenced them. Hence, these women along with the few male nurses get together to form their union, which will fight for their rights and protect their interests. Similarly the refugee women in New Colony like Promila and Khetromoni who had never ventured much beyond their village learn the language of meetings, processions and demands for rights. They attend the meetings called by the communist activists and take part in processions demanding better relief from the state. These women also learn new concepts like *jobordokhol* meaning forcible occupation. When the state refuses or fails to help adequately, these women learn that they must make their own provisions. They work in tandem with the men to occupy bare lands and quickly build up mud hutments, and set up refugee colonies. For schoolgirls like Chhobi picketing is a new word. They learn about conducting strikes and engaging in picketing activity. During the famine Chhobi also learns about taking part in processions to force the administration to accede to their demands. For these women all these are the tools that the political movements equip them with to build their lives in the emerging nation.

The political movements were quite inspiring in an indirect way. It is perhaps the atmosphere of building a new nation that inspired the women to take a new look at their lives, and try and rebuild it. Thus Maya takes the first step of reading newspaper to the people coming to the relief kitchen. Then when Odhir dies and there is no one and nothing to keep her in Kusumpur, she leaves her uncle's home where she had always been abused to start a new life in another village as a teacher. It seems that the entire atmosphere gave

courage to such women to break free of abusive and humiliating relationships. Deboki does the same when she leaves her marital home. For both Bhodra and Shita, it becomes possible not only to fall in love as widows but also to acknowledge this love. Bhodra is able to respect the love of the Irish soldier O'Neil and then when Partho comes and clears her misunderstanding she is able to acknowledge and reciprocate his love across the boundaries of class, caste and convention. In many cases without making a radical break with their traditional roles these women are able to transcend the perimeters of their conventional space. In sum, the process of politicisation opened up a lot of possibilities for Bengali women.

Conclusion

The position of the middle class Bengali woman towards the political movements in the twenty-five years between 1930 and 1955 could have been one of many. There were many who were indifferent and/or uninvolved physically and/or psychologically. These women were either unable to participate because they were confined to the inner quarters or they were simply indifferent to nationalist or any other kind of politics. A second group of women were those who were sympathisers and identified with one of the many movements led by the Congress, the revolutionaries and the communists. They were not members of parties or groups and did not participate directly but helped with whatever resources they had. The third group comprised a smaller number of women who were members of some political organisation and were actively involved in the activities. The gamut of female characters that populate the narrative of the novels analysed in this chapter belong to any one of these three broad groups. First, for the women who were actively involved in the movements, the movements were liberating in many ways. It liberated them from their set of familial roles and allowed them to exercise their abilities in other areas of experience. Their identities became multi-dimensional. It also allowed them to consort with a larger realm of work and experience. The liberating effect of the political movements in the life of ordinary women is visible through Maya and Chhobi in *Nobankur,* Bhodra and Deboki in *Paka Dhaner Gan* among others. Chhobi's involvement in the relief work undertaken by the political activists in the village after the

famine enables her to break free of the patriarchal stranglehold of her grandfather and father, Maya is able to leave her abusive family behind and Bhodra is able to put behind the memories of her marriage and husband's suicide. Deboki travels far from her beginnings as an abused housewife to becoming a nurse, a shelter for her father and siblings, an economic support for her family, a talented singer and a generous and warm friend. Second, the novels suggest, paradoxically, that the political movements also led towards what I term the 're-sexualisation' of women. The novels indicate how in subtle ways their feminine roles were reinforced by political organisations not sensitive to the process of 'engendering'. Particularly in the writings of Sabitri Roy this disturbing tendency of the communist movement is suggested. The story of Sagori also indicates how intelligent and committed female comrades might be marginalised within the movement. There is the distinct suggestion in Sabitri Roy's work that the political outfits continued to practice and perpetuate gender discrimination and gender hierarchy. Hence it was almost inevitable that politically committed and ambitious women like Sagori were going to be disappointed. Third, there was a portion of the female population whose lives were barely, if at all, touched by the political movements in that very little changed in their lives. Ashapurna Devi in her trilogy also expresses her scepticism about the politicisation of women. Through her microscopic view of one middle class Bengali family in Calcutta, Ashapurna depicts how far the ideals of freedom were from the life of an ordinary Bengali woman. For women like Ashapurna's Subornolota, nationalist politics had little to offer; it could not enter the gates of the *ontohpur.* Finally, the novels also indicate, particularly Roy's detailed novels on the communist movement, the immensity and the nature of the work done by women, and their growth as human beings as they immersed themselves in their political work. As Tanika Sarkar says about Roy's work: 'It corresponds closely, or actually anticipates so much of what the scholarship of Sunil Sen, the autobiographical writings of Manikuntala Sen, or Abani Lahiri's oral history convey.' (p. ix).

The novels convey both a sense of exhilaration and scepticism about the process of politicisation of middle class Bengali women. There is the promise

of continuing struggle, of change alongside an apprehension that it might be too little, too late.

Amita Roy (later Malik) as disc jockey at All India Radio, Lucknow, 1944

Noted media person and film critic Amita joined All India Radio in 1944 for a couple of years when there were few women in the field, later going on to broadcast with the BBC, CBC, and other international broadcasting organisations.

Courtesy: Amita Malik, New Delhi

Malavika Karlekar, *Visualizing Indian Women 1875-1947 (New Delhi: OUP 2006)*

The nature of women's work

And so he goes on cackling, 'Oh, but don't you think it's funny!-
Aunt Kitty selling pigeons' eggs and figs and cloves and honey.
The eggs are long and conical, the cloves are convoluted,
The figs have arabesques on them nicely executed.
From dawn till dusk Aunt Kitty sings a string of motley airs,
All mews and barks and brays and neighs (Aunt Kitty calls them Prayers).'

Sukumar Ray, 'Old Tickler', *Abol Tabol*, trans. by Satyajit Ray in *Nonsense Rhymes* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1997).

'A woman's work is never done' goes the traditional saying suggesting a woman's ceaseless work cycle. Yet in middle class Hindu Bengali society a woman's work is often overlooked and on the balance sheet her contribution is perceived as negligible. She is usually seen as somebody who has to be provided for, who does not earn her living. While the wages women receive for their work can be seen from statistical compilations, as is well known now, the wages do not accurately represent the amount of work women do and what that work amounts to in economic value. The Report of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, 14 to 30 July 1980 says, women perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours while receiving only one-tenth of the world income. This wide disparity in the hours worked and the wages received definitely indicates exploitation and discrimination against women in the workplace. Coupled with this we have to factor in the reality that much of women's work is non-remunerative and the kind of waged work many women usually do is labour intensive requiring long hours and is frequently low-paid. In this chapter I argue that it is important to understand that for women work encompasses both the private and the public sphere and for many their work is not simply about wages even when their presence in the public workplace is directly due to financial requirements of the family. It connotes many other things besides, which are equally if not more important to the women concerned. This is not to play down the fact that wages are very important to the women and that they influence their status and well-being in the family and society. In this chapter I will examine the range of work women engage in across the broad spectrum of the middle class in the novels, also taking in the urban-rural factor. The object of the exercise is to understand how their various works impact on the identity of these women, as perceived by family, society and they themselves. In other words, how important is women's work in the politics of identity and how do the various kinds of work women do chart the trajectory of the politics?

As has been discussed earlier in the chapter on education, the attitude of the various government agencies varied towards female education illustrating that the state and society was divided and in a flux with regard to their conceptions

of contemporary gender relationships. There were the contradictory pulls of restoring the asymmetrical relations between the sexes and of accepting the changed socio-economic circumstance and working within the parameters of those changes. In the Radhakrishnan Report of 1948 there is the reiteration of the traditional perspective of gender roles, which implied that women's work should be related to their familial identities and their education should reflect the work they were and would be doing in fulfilment of their primary role as 'home-makers'. At the same time the *First Five Year Plan* appears to take cognizance of the social and economic impact of independence and partition and expresses a pragmatic view whereby gender roles are modified to contain the damage of partition and help build the struggling new nation. However, both the documents demonstrate a limited understanding of the reality of women's education and work. There is no indication of the wide ranging work women did within the ambit of their 'homemaker' role, particularly in rural India, nor an awareness that trainings offered in higher educational institutions can only be accessed by a very small percentage of the female population. Largely, women were perceived as secondary workers whose work was to supplement the primary worker's income. This was the ideology that also informed the policies drawn up by women's organisations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). In her report for the AIWC, Renuka Ray wrote that women had to work as men were underpaid.[165] It seems it was widely regarded that the man's earning should be sufficient for the maintenance of the entire family. As Geraldine Forbes notes in *Women in Modern India*, even by the 1930s only 2% of middle class Indian women and virtually no aristocratic women were into salaried work. Hence the women who formed women's organisations and tried to influence nationalist policies and then state policies in independent India considered those women who had to earn a living as unfortunate and an aberration.[166] Significantly, trade unions also took this view. In a deposition before the Royal Commission on Factory Labour (1931), two union officials in Bengal recommended a 'family wage'

[165] Geraldine H. Forbes, p. 171, 178-179.
[166] *Ibid.*, p.171.

that would be enough to support women and children.[167] Given the prevalence of views that accorded primacy to a man's work and wage, the thrust of social policy planners and trade unions was towards ensuring better wages for men rather than enabling women to work in better conditions and with better wages. However, perceptions changed to cope with economic necessities, particularly after Partition. The *Towards Equality* Report of 1974 conducting an assessment of the progress of Indian women in the twentieth century underlines the role of practical needs in determining the participation in the labour force:

> Social attitudes to women's work reflect to a great extent the current needs being faced by society. In some sections, economic pressure has precipitated withdrawal of the traditional prejudice against women working outside the home. Since this is also the class which has generally been more exposed to education and other instruments of modernisation, they have benefited more from change and development unlike the women whose world has remained confined to the limits set by tradition.[168]

The Bengali Hindu society, which has traditionally been resistant to women taking up waged work, showed first signs of compromising with 'tradition' after the famine when many women found themselves and their children abandoned by the men[169]. The process was accelerated with partition of Bengal in 1947 when once again women found themselves responsible for the survival of many a family. Bengali Hindu society had come a long way since the first generation of educated middle class women in the late nineteenth century who were encouraged to take up voluntary work for social welfare schemes, as it was considered reprehensible that they should work for a wage. Kadambini Ganguly, the first female graduate in the British Empire

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[167] Sujata Gothoskar (ed.), *Struggles of Women at Work* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1997), p. 5.

[168] *Towards Equality*, report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (New Delhi: Government of India Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974), p.151.

[169] Greenough, Paul R., *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* (New York, Oxford: OUP, 1982), pp.190-194. See also Bina Agarwal, 'Gender Relations and Food Security: Coping with Seasonality, Drought, & Famine in South Asia', in Lourdes Beneria and Shelley Feldman (eds), *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1992). Agarwal quotes the estimates given by Mahalonobis, Mokerjee, and Ghosh (1946) that show 'a predominance of young and middle-aged females among those made destitute by the famine. In January 1943, 55% of all destitute and 66% of the destitute in the 15-50 age group were female. Women of this age group also constituted the largest number of new additions to the destitute between January 1943 and May 1944, the worst period of the famine.'

who was also one of first women to qualify as doctor, was called a prostitute by a renowned periodical *Bongonibasi.*[170]

In her book *Woman's Role in Economic Development* Ester Boserup demonstrates the skewed perception that perceives 'productive' work as man's work even in the development plans of international donor agencies.[171] Her pioneering work draws from specific community studies conducted in Africa and Asia. It illustrates the various nature of women's work in the different communities in Africa and Asia, the material conditions that lead women to do the work, the skewed perception of the state and donor agencies regarding women's work and how that affects both the women and their community. Boserup's work focussed on some elementary factors that influenced development plans drawn up for communities in Asia and Africa. It delineates the eurocentrism and male-bias inherent in most development plans, while making visible women's contribution to the family and community economy. Boserup uses field studies of different communities to show the specificities of a woman's experience and work while also pointing out how the factors that regulate a woman's life and work within one community can also be very different for different women. The importance of Boserup's work for my study is the way she locates the women in the urban-rural matrix and then categorises the work that women from the different sections in the community do. Her analysis makes it possible to draw the commonality of the experience of a community of women while also understanding their differences. Boserup also marks the dynamism of communities analysing what that means for women and the work they do.

Hillary Standing's book on women and waged work *Dependence and Autonomy: Women's Employment and the Family in Calcutta* examines a sample population of 114 Bengali women in the early 1980s.[172] Standing categorises the women in the sample as women of West Bengal middle class

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[170] See also Chitra Deb, *Mohila Daktar: Bhin Groher Basinda* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1994), pp.98-99. Also read Geraldine H. Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.162.
[171] Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (Aldershot: Gower, 1986).
[172] Hillary Standing, *Dependence and Autonomy: Women's Employment and the Family in Calcutta* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991).

origins, women from refugee households and women from poor proletarian households. The interesting data that comes from Standing's sample is the high percentage of refugee women in waged work. While Standing reckons that among the general Calcutta population approximately 15% are refugee households, in the sample approximately 47% of the working women were from refugee households indicating the greater presence of refugee women in the labour workforce. Secondly the sample also suggests the limited options for women from West Bengal middle class origin with regard to the workplace. One-third of these women were employed as schoolteachers while a further 8 undertook private tuition at home. Thirdly, while waged work enables women to have access to economic resources it does not inevitably lead to an enhanced status at home and greater decision making powers. Status and power at home would seem to depend on multiple factors like the composition of the family, the number of other earning members and the percentage of the family expense that the woman contributes, the material conditions of the adult males in the household and so on. This observation is quite significant for this chapter because the chapter explores how, if at all, women's lives and their status change because of their work. Some of the questions that this chapter asks are: What are the kinds of work that Bengali middle class women are doing during this period? How important are their work to the women and how do they react and respond to their work? How does their work inform their self-definition and how does it impact on their perception within the family and society? Eventually, to what extent does 'work' empower and emancipate middle class Bengali women?

This chapter employs literature to obtain a perspective on Bengali women's work and has a narrower focus than either of the works discussed earlier. Though there is a wide cross section of characters in the novels, the focus here is on how the authors have portrayed the lives and the works of the middle class women. In another way the scope of analysis is wider here because I examine the impact of work rather than waged work on women's lives. This is important for few reasons. As a large portion of the work done by women is non-remunerative, when we analyse their waged work only, like many other analyses we are insensitive to the significant contribution women

make to the family and society through their 'non-waged work'. Also non-remunerative work may be quite important to the women themselves and inform a facet of their identity as cooks, artists, conscientious political individuals and so on. As Hillary Standing has demonstrated in her work, there is no direct unproblematic correlation between waged work and women's emancipation. There is no denying that economic dependency leads to a condition of powerlessness. However, as Standing puts it, emancipation 'encompasses more than economic independence.' Extending her argument a bit further I would like to propose that work per se can be positively enabling for many women even when that work does not greatly reduce their economic dependency. What is drudgery for one can bolster another's self-esteem even if it does not lead to 'emancipation'. The impact of these various works that the women in these novels engage in is quite subtle in many cases but quite crucial at the same time. Similarly it might be possible to perceive of waged work as exploitation and drudgery where the work is undertaken for economic necessities under extremely straitened circumstances. In such a situation what does remunerative work do to a woman's self-perception? As commentators have noted Engel's prescription of bringing 'the whole female sex back into the public industry'[173] as the first condition for the liberation of the wife does not work as simply as had been imagined. In practice the nexus of capitalism with its constant hunger for cheap, compliant labour and patriarchy has subjected many women across the board to further exploitation when they have joined the labour force. I will explore the authors' portrayal of the involvement of middle class women in waged work and how this work has transformed their identity.

The work done by the female characters in the novels can be broadly characterised into i) the labour that is put in for the household, ii) charitable, political and/or social work, iii) waged work and iv) work that is done for pleasure or personal interest. The specificities of these broad categories vary according to the material conditions and locale of the characters. For instance

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[173] Fredrick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, with an Introduction and Notes by Eleanor Burke Leacock (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972), pp. 137-138.

the conditions, scope and requirements of women living in rural areas are different from those of women living in towns, which again are different from those women living in Calcutta. The middle class woman in rural Bengal, for example, took an active part in the food production for the household. For the urban middle class woman the same was not quite possible though some might have a little patch where they could cultivate vegetables. It was also possible for the women to sell some of their produce in rural Bengal like fruits, coconut, eggs and excess vegetables through either a family member or a fellow villager like Kalatharan in *Paka Dhaner Gan* gets Ali to sell her ripe bananas in the village market or *hat* and Lota in the same novel gets someone to sell the lychees from their tree.

In *Silver Shackles*, Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay states that since 1911 women's employment in India has been on the decline. She writes that the population of female workers has decreased both in proportion to the female population and to the percentage of the total labour force. There has only been a marginal increase in the percentage of white-collar workers, like doctors, nurses and other health personnel, teachers, office workers etc.[174] *Towards Equality* also reveals an overall decline in female workforce participation rate from 1921 onwards.[175] It has been documented how legislations aimed at improving the conditions at work and ensuring that women workers had better facilities like maternity benefits, standard 8 hour work shifts and so on turned out to be counter productive because industries started perceiving their women workers as expensive liabilities. Thus, at the first opportunity the impulse would be to retrench the women workers. As far as the middle class Bengali women are concerned another picture emerges from Nirmala Banerjee's study 'Poverty, Work and Gender in Urban India'.[176] Banerjee writes, 'A somewhat disturbing aspect of women's unemployment problem appeared to be that their rate of unemployment had gone up steeply with levels of education.' In the figures for 1987-88 she shows that as many as

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[174] Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee, *Silver Shackles: Women and Development in India* (Oxford: OXFAM, 1984), p.48.
[175] *Towards Equality,* pp. 149-153.
[176] Nirmala Banerjee, 'Poverty, Work and Gender in Urban India' (Occasional Paper No. 133, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1992).

20% of graduate women were unemployed as against less than 10% of men. Banerjee's figures serve to make problematic the relation between increase in women's education, which in turn increases women's chance of finding good jobs and their actual participation in the work force. In other words the liberal western model of female emancipation premised on the idea that availability of female education will lead to women's economic self-reliance, which in turn will bring about their emancipation, is shown to be flawed. While education and access to economic resources can definitely be empowering, they are not two consecutive steps that will lead to enhanced self-esteem and better conditions for women. On the other hand, from Standing's work and other studies like that of Rachel Webber, it can be concluded that large number of women from East Bengal who became refugees after Partition, entered the sphere of waged labour. Hence it is reasonable to say that too often neither enlightenment nor acquiring skills through education enabled women to break through the taboos regarding participation in waged work. Sheer necessity was more effective in bringing down the patriarchal strictures about women's engagement in remunerative work. With the Second World War, the famine and Partition following each other in close succession, many families lost the male breadwinner either through death or desertion and for the first time there were many families that were headed by women. As Bharati Ray notes in her essay 'Women in Calcutta: The years of Change', it was only after the Second World War that a larger number of women took up 'gainful employment'. With inflation climbing to an unprecedented 300% within a span of eight years, women were sent out to work to balance the credit sheets of numerous families in Bengal.[177]

Women were the reserve labour force for the state as well as for the family to be utilised when the necessity arose. Then they could be pushed back into the 'primary' sphere of the home when labour supply exceeded demand. This trend with regard to female employment has been noticed even amongst the refugees where the first generation to experience the trauma of forced migration and resettlement worked hard in factories and offices. In the second

[177] Bharati Ray, 'Women in Calcutta: The Years of Change', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol.2* (Calcutta: OUP, 1990), pp.34-41.

generation, when the family economic situation had stabilised, some women did not take up waged work anymore.[178] The drastic decline of women's employment, particularly the manufacturing sector (women as a percentage of all factory employee declined from 16.5% to 15% in the five years between 1927 and 1932)[179] in pre and post-independence India, shows that neither the colonial nor the Congress government was committed to facilitating women's entry into the sphere of waged work.

However, state policies also change with the changing socio-political scenario. After partition of the country the state government of West Bengal found its exchequer burdened with a huge number of refugees. When it found its resources stretched in tending to the thousands of refugees who spilled out of the trains at Sealdah station every day, it started discouraging people from living in the state camps or on making demands on the state exchequer.[180] At the same time, by way of encouraging and supporting the large number of women from East Bengal coming out to work after partition, the state instituted provisions like ladies seats in public transport.[181] In a letter to Morarji Desai, Renuka Ray, who was the Minister for Rehabilitation in the West Bengal Government, writes that the borders were sealed in 1957, with no refugee family being allowed to migrate who did not have relations in India who could look after them. They had to give a written declaration that they would not claim any 'rehabilitation benefits'. In another report on the rehabilitation of the refugees that was broadcast over the radio Renuka Ray states that out of 3.09 million refugees who were in West Bengal at that time, rehabilitation assistance could be given to only 1.88 million refugees. With the state government limiting its assistance to the refugees, due to insufficient

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[178] Rachel Weber, 'Re(creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta' in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003), p.76.
[179] Geraldine H. Forbes, p.175. Sujata Gothoskar records that between 1920 and 1975, the proportion of women workers in textile, jute and mining reduced from 20, 15 and 38% to 2.5, 2 and 5%, respectively.
[180] See Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50', in Suvir Kaul (ed.), *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), pp. 74-83. Chatterji writes: 'Stopping free relief to all able-bodied males was only the first of a series of measures to limit government liability towards the refugees. The essence of the policy was to whittle down, by one device or another, the numbers eligible for help from the state.'
[181] Rachel Weber, p.75.

funds disbursed by the central government,[182] women from these households were encouraged and pushed to earn for the family.

Over the two and half decades the nature of work that women were doing changed, particularly in the rural areas. In the urban areas there were more women in professions like medicine, both as doctors and nurses, which had earlier been largely the domain of men and few European women. Apart from teaching, many middle class women were also doing administrative and clerical jobs. In rural areas women also got involved in the changes brought about by the twin factors of industrialisation and colonisation as the traditional trades were being squeezed out by the colonial economy. Domestic industries like hand spinning, weaving, paper, jute articles etc., which employed more female labour were more affected by the economic transformation during the British period.[183] Simultaneously as women were being displaced out of some traditional occupations in rural Bengal, there were other spheres that were opening up to them in the offices and industries in urban Bengal.[184] Many women who had been engaged in occupations like rice-husking, making clay dolls, or weaving found themselves out of employment as rice mills came up, and foreign toys and mill-made textiles flooded the market. As social historians have noticed, when something like the threshing of rice, which was done almost entirely by women, was mechanised, it was taken over almost entirely by men.[185] This was common work for even middle class women in rural areas. They would thresh their share of the paddy and make rice at home. In times of financial crisis, they would do threshing for richer neighbours to earn in kind to feed the family. When rice mills took over the threshing and making of rice, people had to pay the mills for these services and women lost a means of earning. These changes account for the decline

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[182] Correspondence file in Renuka Ray's private papers, Oral History Transcripts, NMML, New Delhi. Also see Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengal Refugees: A lesson in Survival' in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol. 2* (Calcutta: OUP, 1990), pp.70-77.
[183] *Towards Equality*, pp. 152-153.
[184] Geraldine H. Forbes, pp.157-161.
[185] Nirmala Banerjee, 'Poverty, Work and Gender in Urban India', pp.63-65. Apart from rice husking Banerjee gives the example of a fan manufacturing unit where the women began to lose their jobs in armature winding after a tripartite agreement between trade unions, employers and the government increased the rates of pay. Men began to compete for those jobs and were given a preference by the employers even though they had no experience comparable to that of the women they were replacing.

in the percentage of women in the labour force. However, there is also another explanation as the women who found themselves out of a job found other avenues for earning. Sujata Gothoskar has pointed that increasing number of women workers were being absorbed in the unorganised sector.[186] Unrepresented in official statistics these women again became the part of another sort of 'invisible' work force.

Professions for women

I will be examining here three of Sabitri Roy's novels, *Sworolipi*, *Paka Dhaner Gan*, and *Meghna Podma*, along with some brief discussions of *Trisrota, Subomolota* and *Bokulkotha,* and *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga.*

Sabitri Roy's novels seem to have become more and more radical as her writing career progressed. Among the novels being read in this thesis, *Trisrota* is the earliest work, followed by *Sworolipi*, then the three volumes of *Paka Dhaner Gan* and finally *Meghna Podma.* Podma in *Trisrota* is a housewife who searches for her identity with a painful restlessness. She tries to find it in her relations with the men she falls in love with including her husband, in her motherhood, as also in her attempts to understand and participate in the political movements swirling all around her. There is a lot of inner turmoil as she is striving to find a meaning to her life but there is also a crippling sort of stasis. In the end her husband is on the run while political activist and friend Bishworup is arrested by the police and taken away and Podma watches on with her daughter. In a way this describes her role in the novel, as a 'spectator' rather than a 'doer'. The lives of the people all around her are busy and eventful as they are all connected with the various political movements. It is perhaps Podma's timidity and an intellectual uncertainty about what was the right course to take that prevents her from doing something to address the unhappiness she feels about her life and the roles that she plays.

Yet this does not entirely explain the cause of stasis in her life. This uncertainty about her self and her roles in life stem from her growing up years.

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[186] Sujata Gothoskar (ed.), *Struggles of Women at Work* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1997), p.4.

She is an intelligent and effervescent child growing up in her ancestral village Ruposhi with her father's elder brother, his wife and his sister, all of whom are Gandhians in their ideology. She is spirited enough to side with the underdogs in the village hierarchy that manifests itself even in the school and forms a playgroup with a menial's son who cannot be accommodated in the playgroup of the landlord's son. She spins and weaves with the other students and helps them by carrying earth for the road that the boys of the school are building. At this point her parents arrive and frown on the way she is being brought up, almost as a wild child. Her aunts and uncle accept her parents' authority over her and their criticism and reluctantly put in the checks and balances that have traditionally regulated the lives of girls in Bengal. In other words, from a human being, Podma, suddenly finds that she must become a girl. Works like weaving and carrying earth are deemed to improper for a girl from a 'respectable', middle class family and Podma is instead urged to learn how to cook and keep a home. She is told how her younger sister has already learnt to cook fish and make puddings. Podma's life gets circumscribed within the walls of the home and she has private lessons. When she goes to Calcutta to study further she engages in her moments of rebellion like going to the Marxist study circles and meetings, and refusing to marry the groom her brother has chosen for her. Her wedding to Orunabho is definitely an act of rebellion. However subsequent to that it is an agonising struggle for her to structure her life as she contends with the socialisation that has been about what a woman's role is and how she should conduct herself.

Her uncle and aunts had their own notions about the essential Indian woman. Her aunt talks about how the way of the Indian woman was different from that of the western woman. Podma tries to play her wifely role as she had been taught and the conflict arises because her husband expects her to be a comrade on his political and ideological travels, which greatly increases her area of operation. Her roles involve different sets of work that need to be done and Podma finds it difficult to combine the two kinds of work. There are also her own ideological confusions about the various political organisations and the workings of the communist party. Consequently she is unhappy with the work that she does as a 'homemaker' and at the same time is unable to

decide what she could or should do to participate in the political struggle. There is also the hypocrisy of a political ideology that supposedly wants women to be free from the drudgery of their household work yet provides no means to help them to free themselves. On the other hand, like Lota in *Paka Dhaner Gan* and Kuri in *Sworolipi* Podma finds herself making endless cups of tea and food for the comrades as they meet and debate their 'issues'. At one point Orunabho comes inside the house to ask for tea for the meeting members and is embarrassed to find that Podma is still working in the kitchen at two in the afternoon, not having found the time to have her bath and lunch. Podma also writes posters for the party and goes during the elections to campaign among the women who were given their voting rights for the first time. She also translates continually the ailing Bishworup's book in a race against time before death claims him.

Podma thinks that it is more satisfying to feed Bishworup than Orunabho who reads while he eats not quite knowing what it is that he is eating. Women often complain about how unsatisfying it is to feed certain people. Feeding and eating is important to many women because cooking is a task that takes up and defines so much of their lives. So when food is eaten unmindfully or carelessly, for the cook it signifies a lack of appreciation and devaluing of their labour that consumes the greater portion of their lives. Ashapurna Devi in *Subornolota* subtly illustrates how a woman's sense of her own identity can be involved with her cooking. Umashoshi takes the responsibility of cooking for the large family one main meal of the day while her three sisters-in-law take turns to cook the other meal. There is an uproar one day when Subornolota is not able to do her turn as her baby is sick. When it becomes clear that the baby has measles Subornolota arranges for a Brahmin's widow to be engaged to take over the arduous cooking chores. While the other sisters-in-law are pleased, Umashoshi feels as if she has lost something. For Umashoshi her sense of self worth was associated with her cooking. As long as she cooked she was important to the family. If someone took it over then she would become superfluous to the family. The narrator explains that it was just to establish her importance that Umashoshi took a disproportionate amount of the household work on herself. The irony is that she is never

regarded as important even when she is doing most of the cooking and other household chores. She is regarded as dispensable as are the other wives. Yet Umashoshi feels that as long as she does the cooking she is vital to the operation of the family. So when that task is taken off her she feels like a shadow that has lost its body. (p. 272-276). To the men, the labour and skill required for cooking is revealed only when the women are sent away due to the plague and they have to cook for themselves. They find it difficult to even cook rice and it is their cousin Jogu, who is not considered 'manly' who eventually rescues them by cooking for them.

In *Trisrota* Podma's friend Bipasha is more confident about her own roles in life. Though she loves Bishworup and is anxious about his illness, she does not let that stand in the way of her training as a teacher and her work amongst the deprived children. She teaches and looks after a group of children in the hills. Perhaps one important difference between Bipasha and Podma is the factor of socialisation. Bipasha's mother died when she was very young and she cannot even remember her mother. She was brought up in school hostels completely estranged from the family. So the incipient training to become a woman that is carried on within the family is something Bipasha did not experience much. Also Bipasha's mother died after much suffering. Her father was a depraved and adulterous man and Bipasha's mother committed suicide when she could not bear it any more. This probably steels Bipasha against the internal suffering that haemorrhages women from within.

Bipasha comes across as someone who is a 'doer' and who has no doubts about what she does, be it her political ideologies or her profession as a teacher. She is able to place all her aspirations, duties, and experiences in slots where they belong without giving rise to conflicting situations and takes everything along with her. She brings all her idealism, tenacity and softer emotions to her teaching of little children and makes it a sustaining and creative process that stimulates both student and teacher. She writes as an unknown friend to her little charges expressing disappointment when they have been naughty and commending them for good behaviour or work done. So when she is away to look after Bishworup, they write little letters to her

asking her to come back with reports of who has been good and bad and how the fruit tree has grown up. Bipasha seems to be an emotionally, intellectually and materially independent person. In both Podma and Bipasha's life we witness the different kinds of work that they engage in and remunerative work is only a tiny fraction of all the work that they do. For Podma a large part of her work is household related but there is a great deal of work that she does because she is conscious of the deprivations in society and considers these works to be important, like translating Bishworup's book, making shirts for the pavement and slum children, adopting and teaching an orphan boy, among many others.

When Podma decides to marry Bipasha's brother Orunabho, her mother is concerned that Orunabho does not earn anything as a political activist. Podma's uncle Shoshanko says that when the time comes Orunabho will certainly find a job to support Podma and in case he does not Podma as an educated woman can find a job to support herself and Orunabho. To which her mother Suhasini replies, 'We did not educate her for the purpose of enabling her to work.' (p.104). This was a popular perception and most parents did not perceive that their daughters would work to earn a living. Just as many men would feel that their masculinity had been affronted if their wives went to work, for parents also it was shameful that the daughter had to earn a living, which implied that the husband was unable to look after his wife or the father was unable to look after the family. It tarnished the 'honour' of the family. Podma does not take up waged work even when she feels distant from her husband and perceives their relationship crumbling. She has grown up with examples like her two aunts who were politically conscious individuals and ran an ashram and a girl' school in the village. However as an adult she is unable to undertake Gandhian reconstruction work like her aunts or able to work among the industrial proletariat like her husband and his female comrades. It is an agony for Podma that she in unable to do anything that would make her respect herself more and probably lead her husband to value her more. Here work is not about wages but a manifestation of her deep belief and idealism, and also about a better self-perception and self-esteem.

In *Sworolipi* the female characters are more actively involved with the public sphere, as the novel focuses closely on the workings of the communist party. While Shita and Sagori are schoolteachers, Sumitra is a lecturer and Kuri is a political sympathiser. They are all urban women, dwelling in Calcutta though they might have spent their childhood elsewhere. Shita is one of five siblings and has an elder sister Hoimonti. Her father was a schoolteacher and her mother a housewife in East Bengal. An aunt who had an ashram brought up Shita while Hoimonti stayed with her parents in Modhubon. Even as a young unmarried woman Shita had started teaching in a school away from her parents. What had led Shita to teach is not evident but it opens out the world of political activism to her. It enables her to meet Rothi, who is a neighbour and Prithwi, who had been her father's student long ago. She does not beome a member but she gets drawn into their activities as a sympathiser helping them with donations and writing pamphlets and posters for them. As a single woman living away from the supervisory gaze of her family, her political interests and teaching are the two central things in her life. It appears that when she was married to Debojyoti, Shita had left her teaching job but when she becomes a widow she takes up the job again to run the household comprising her daughter Mithu and mother-in-law Menoka. Her work at this point in her life is simply for survival. Her world expands after the death of her husband and contrary to Prithwi's beliefs she does not become entrapped in a widow's rituals. She becomes a member of the communist party cell in her school but she works according to her own convictions. Her husband was not a communist but Shita chooses not to go according to his political beliefs. Similarly she does not accept everything that the party says though she is a committed worker. She displays an independence of thought and a firmness of conviction that is not visible in her elder sister Hoimonti.

Hoimonti with her pretensions to 'modern' living finds it difficult to do anything that her husband does not approve of. When Shita goes to Hoimonti to ask for donations for the party as Hoimonti was sympathetic to the party once, she gives Shita a piece of jewellery but cautions her not to mention anything to Hoimonti's husband. Hoimonti's work involves, apart from keeping house for her husband, looking beautiful and modern before the public at large. Her

father is crushed when he finds a news item that mentions her joining films as an actress. However, it would appear that given the way her husband controls her life, this is not her career decision. So it is quite different to the decision Irani takes in *Meghna Podma* to act in a touring theatre group for famine relief. From what we are told about her husband and his aspirations to wealth, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hoimonti has been cast in films as a money-making instrument. If Hoimonti will be able to chart a different course for herself when she starts earning it is something we do not know. Thus, a woman's remunerative work is seen as not being empowering in all cases. It can be turned into exploitative mechanism for the patriarchy where a woman's labour, skill and physical assets are sold for acquiring wealth. This does not in any way imply that all women acting in films were being exploited by the patriarchy but in Hoimonti's case this seems quite probable. Of course in the reaction of her father, we must also read the horror of the middle class morality that perceived the 'film world' as depraved and immoral, partly because the first actresses were women of dubious reputation, perhaps prostitutes, and also because films as indeed theatre involved men and women working quite intimately on the sets and stage. Working in films was taboo to most 'respectable' women from the middle classes.

Sumitra and Sagori are committed communists like Shita, while also being teachers. Sumitra is a college lecturer and Sagori is a school teacher. They live independently and seem to work quite hard both for their profession and their political beliefs. Sumitra also gives private tuitions. When Sagori and Sumitra are introduced to the reader, they are both single and live in a shared house. Of their background it is only known that their parents were Gandhian activists who were shot dead during the Quit India movement. How the sisters veered towards communism is not explained but initially it is revealed that the transition had not been without its agony for Sumitra who finds it difficult to reject completely what her parents believed in. It is quite possible that rather than depending on the benevolence of some relation for their survival, the sisters started teaching after their parents died to support themselves. Of their work, it is seen that their professional work as teachers intersects closely with their work as political activists as they have turned their professional space

into a political space also. We see Sagori talking with her communist colleagues about striking in schools and supporting another school where the teachers were already on strike. So the workplace, in this case the school, becomes for these women not only an economic arena but also a site where issues of rights and exploitation must be thrashed out. This is probably the most significant part of their work. Another important part of their job, which is not explicitly mentioned but comes across, is the creating and training of the next generation of activists in their students. In a way the sisters extend the scope of their professional responsibility and give their work a larger dimension. It is not so much their teaching per se but their larger duties of fighting on behalf of the deprived people and the party ideology that give the sisters a purpose to their life. Their commitment to their work and ideology is evident in the way Sagori separates from her husband Rothi after he is expelled from the party and Sumitra dissociates from Prithwi after his expulsion. However the strength of their commitment to their political work is proved when Sagori leaves the comfortable job in the party central office to live and work among the peasants in the rural areas during the *Tebhaga*. She dies trying to steer the movement in what she believed to be the right direction.

As it has become evident from the examination so far, in Sabitri Roy's novels many of the female characters are teachers. As Hillary Standing has pointed out, teaching was a popular and conservative choice of profession among women from middle class families in West Bengal. Ever since Bengali women started taking up professions, teaching was approved initially because this was a niche area where female teachers would teach female students and the male-female segregation could be maintained. Of course in time education ceased to be rigidly segregated and women started teaching in coeducational schools and colleges. This gave rise to resentment and in *Trisrota* there is a quip by a male lecturer that suggests the negative attitude that some men had towards female teachers. Komolesh accepts Orunabho's invitation to tea at his house. He says that he has had to take extra classes, as one of his female colleagues is an incompetent teacher. Orunabho says, 'Mrs. Khatun has come to your college hasn't she?' Komolesh answers, 'Like students like

teacher. Why doesn't she look after her household, bring up children – do what is her rightful work.' Podma says, 'Why, Mrs. Khatun is an Oxford graduate.' Komolesh says, 'Exactly so, she has managed to get through just because she is female. Female and Muslim...' (pp. 205-206). While there is no way to verify Mrs. Khatun's competence as a teacher, Komolesh's comments reveal the prejudice against professional women quite clearly. In addition to this preponderance of female teachers in the novels, what is also evident is the wide-ranging work women do, beyond their household duties and their strictly professional responsibilities. In fact it is this range of work that they do which demonstrates interesting and unconventional facets of these characters, throwing a light on their selves that is not visible when we simply consider them as professionals or non-professionals. As most of the female characters play either or both wife and mother, it is useful to keep in mind that these personal roles have three components: there is firstly the emotional component to these roles, then a social component as marriage is a social contract in the Bengali society and offspring born within a marriage are for preserving the lineage, and then finally the economic component as marriages involve financial transaction and women are required to provide labour and the sons inherit the wealth of the father. When a woman works, her work may often be subsumed into the financial component of the familial relationship but sometimes it is not possible to do so. In those cases where the family cannot appropriate this work, it becomes possible for women to use this work to create an empowering space for themselves and enhance their self-perception.

There can also arise during times of crises a situation that can only be described as paradoxical. This relates to social and political crises like the partition, which can empower women who have lost everything and have to fight for their existence. In the life of Promila, Shita's mother and other women like her we see this paradox. In the settlement that the refugees build up called New Colony where Promila lives with her husband and youngest son, the women work together with the men to start a new life. From clearing up the land to erecting the huts made of earth and baked earth tiles, and then preserving these precious shelters from the attacks of goons and the police,

the women work with the men. For Promila this is the last shelter and she tries to keep it as best as she can, while her husband Bisheshwor feels uprooted and broken. She has already created a neat courtyard, growing vegetables around it while her son makes cages for keeping ducks and hens. She has created a network of friends who exchange goods with each other. When Shita visits her she is away visiting someone about half a mile away to collect pumpkin seeds. Shita notices that the residents have all planted spinach and other vegetables and flowers, bringing life to the colony. For women like Khetromoni planting these vegetables is not simply a household work, it is a crucial battle for survival, expressing their resilient spirit. This act of creating their home from scratch is an empowering process, even though the homes are precarious, built on forcibly occupied land and in constant danger of being demolished or burnt down. It is to a large extent the same work that they would do in their original homes with the difference that in the colony every task is spurred by an immediacy, by the struggle for shelter and survival, which perhaps creates a palpable feeling of 'making' their lives and that of their families. This helps to create this feeling of being empowered as women, even when materially they are powerless having lost home and means of livelihood. Also, most women would have come into a set-up in their marital home that was not of their own making. This uprooting provides them with an opportunity to create a set-up, which gives a sense of power and control.

In *Paka Dhaner Gan*, Deboki and Ketoki are two sisters born to a village school master Dinobondhu and his wife Subola. They take lessons from their father at home in the absence of a girls' school in the village when Partho organises their study at a girls' school in a neighbouring town. Both sisters go on to study there before Deboki is withdrawn and married off. Henceforth the two sisters' lives take on a different trajectory even though they meet and intersect. With the emotional content in her marriage being nil, the two functions that Deboki performs as Rajen's wife are doing all the household work and giving birth to a son. Amidst all the physical abuse and drudgery she enjoys feeding the menials who work for the family. As they eagerly eat all the food that she serves them, it seems as if Deboki feels that her role as a daughter-in-law of the family has been redeemed.

> ...This is the only work in this household that gives her happiness. With a great deal of satisfaction she serves them coarse unpolished rice, lentils and *kutoputir chorchodi.* Not a grain of rice is left on the plates of the menials. Deboki looks on with affection. She knows what it feels like to do hard labour all day long. (p. 79)

When Deboki comes to Calcutta to work for a living, she briefly teaches three young children privately. Then with Meghi's assistance she becomes a nurse in a tuberculosis hospital. This job turns her life around; from an abused daughter and wife she becomes a person who assists in the healing process of the sick and takes care of many more. She is a warm and compassionate nurse serving patients many of whom, like Kunal's sister, are terminally ill. This work is important in itself and for someone associated with it, the work can be emotionally quite challenging. For Deboki seeing a patient die is heart wrenching experience. The work is also important for her because not only does it sustain her, it also sustains to a degree her family. Her salary pays for her shelter and basic needs. It helps her to keep Ketoki and later her father and sister Iti when the village school is demolished. Deboki also sends money home along with clothes for her siblings on the occasion of Durga Puja, which are much needed in that impoverished household. Her mother had always abused her as a daughter but when the money and gifts reach the family on the day of Lakshmi Puja, she says that Lakshmi has provided for Lakshmi. (p. 320). Her mother's comparing Deboki to Lakshmi herself shows how much her position within the family has changed from an undesired burdensome daughter to a goddess. Her father is overwhelmed and also ashamed of his inability to provide for his family. This inability undermines the parents' authority before a daughter such as Ketoki, who tells Deboki that she is not concerned about informing her parents about her movements. She says, 'Parents who can bear children but can't provide for their upkeep are no parents of mine.' (p. 343).In her brief comment Ketoki succinctly links financial resource and authority.

Financial security definitely helps Deboki to live independently with dignity. When she was living with her in-laws she was unable to protect even herself

and could not do anything when her husband took away her son from her. Now she is able to carve out a life for herself and support her family. Her work in the hospital helps her to live a life of dignity, without being beholden to anyone. She also discovers herself and a renewed joy in living. She takes pleasure in being able to do things for the elderly Aunt Onnoda who had saved her from certain death. For the first time in her life it also gives her a sense of power, of being instrumental and effective, of being able to act on her own initiative. It also provides her with the confidence to develop her relationship with the press photographer Kunal, as an equal even though there are lots of differences between them. Now Deboki has the confidence to reach out to others less fortunate than her. When one of the ayahs in the hospital falls ill, Deboki strives to have the hospital admit her and treat her as she contracted tuberculosis while working in the hospital:

> That evening as Deboki was returning home, a child of one of the hospital ayahs called out to her from the hospital gate.
> 'Mother's calling you,' he said. 'She's vomiting red water.'
> Deboki was shocked. She followed the child immediately to their house. Sushila, the child's mother, was sitting outside. 'Have you called a doctor?' Deboki asked.
> Sushila nodded gloomily. 'He advised me to go back to my hometown,' she said. 'A change of climate will do me good, he said!'
> 'Can't you talk to the Matron about giving a free bed to Sushila?' Meghi asked Deboki. 'She's an employee of the hospital, after all.'
> That very day Deboki went to speak to the Matron.
> 'It's not possible,' the Matron said. 'If we give free bed to one employee, every sick employee will demand the same.'
> 'But doesn't the hospital have any responsibility towards sick people who have worked here?'
> The Matron evaded the uncomfortable question. 'We can't have a special rule for this hospital,' she said defensively.
> 'But tuberculosis patients are different from other patients,' Deboki persisted.
> 'All right,' said the Matron grudgingly. 'I shall discuss this with the Superintendent. But don't hope for anything.'
> Deboki realised that the Matron would not take any trouble for Sushila. She decided to take matters into her own hands. (pp. 365-366).

Sure enough Sushila is sacked after twenty years of service and when she leaves the only money she receives is the one from the donation fund that Deboki had started for her amongst the nurses. Deboki does not stop at this

but visits the ayah's quarters to see their living conditions. She is overwhelmed by the appalling squalor and gets together with Meghi to collect warm clothes for the underfed shivering children. They decide on starting a regular fund for the ayahs to help them if anyone fell ill and also to form a union to fight for their rights.

Deboki also sings beautifully, perhaps learning from her father who was a well-known folk singer. She uses this talent in a concert organised to raise funds for the treatment of a tuberculosis patient. While her father sang professionally and gave tuitions in music, Deboki simply loves her music and sings with all her soul. Her little sister Iti tells Kunal how Deboki sings to herself when she thinks no one is listening. Deboki also arranges to send medicines to Partho for use among the Hajong peasants that Partho is working with. With her siblings and father living with her in her household she also takes responsibility for feeding them, collecting greens from the neighbourhood when there is no money to buy vegetables. She also remembers Kunal's birthday and cooks for him and looks after his room when he is away on assignment. As was seen earlier, Deboki's work is not limited to her household work and her professional duties as a nurse. Her work as a nurse gives her a firm social position and an economic security that enables her to extend the perimeters of her work and help others, without bothering about returns, financial or otherwise. Her musical talent is something that she could use to earn more money but she chooses not to do that.

Bhodra also spends a significant amount of her time in serving others while also cultivating her artistic skills as a poet. Her profession as a teacher again is important because it enables her to be self-reliant and look after her old father-in-law. As a young widow Bhodra's profession is also about finding a meaning to her own life. She had been married at sixteen and a week after her wedding her husband had gone abroad to pursue his studies. There he had fallen in love with a fellow student and, unable to sort his life between his commitments to the woman he had married and the one he loved, he committed suicide. At that time Bhodra was only eighteen. Bhodra had been left stranded on the road, neither able to live her life afresh like a young

unmarried girl nor finding it possible to live a widow's life of memories. Her life as a schoolteacher brought her out of herself and in teaching the students she could experience a qualitative difference in her life. While teaching might not have given her life a direction, it certainly did lend it a purpose and meaning. She is a teacher who does not believe in grading her students and feels that they ought to be encouraged to do the best that they can without labelling them as good, mediocre or bad. She is also an accomplished singer and she helps her students with the music for a dance drama production. However, the work that gives her sense of fulfilment is not teaching but her political work.

Teaching has provided her, like nursing has provided Deboki, a firm base where she has the freedom and the means to structure her life as she wants to. More importantly perhaps, both Bhodra and Deboki's profession allows them to aspire to do greater things. It enables Bhodra to work for the nascent peasant movement. She works as writer and translator for a farmers' periodical called *Chashi.* This work for the periodical enables her to establish a connection with a cause that is larger than her individual life. This gives her life a purpose and also makes her feel that there is some reason for living:

> Late night. All quiet. Bhodra is continuing with the translation. Reverberating within the shores of her psyche is the wondrous declaration. 'We need you as well.' There is a need of her in this world.
> It isn't 'I' want you but 'we' need you. The need is not for the hearth at home. Nor for pleasure. She is needed for work, many people require her services. A strange kind of sensation overwhelms her entire being. The whole of her consciousness is enveloped in a feeling of fulfilment. (p. 146)

The days when widows were cursed to spend their lives as unwanted dependants in the house of some relation were changing in the case of educated women like Bhodra whose education enabled them to do something with their lives. Bhodra is also courageous enough to resign from her job when she is asked to sign a 'loyalty' bond. When she is forced to leave Calcutta with her father-in-law due to the bomb raids, she goes to her in-laws' ancestral village home and starts working among the people there. She starts by running a Red Cross milk canteen for the villagers from her home. She also translates the rest of the time:

> She was translating a Hindi book on Philosophy – the kind of work she had decided to do till she got a job in a school. She would like to support herself. Sotyodorshon sent money regularly – but somewhere she felt uncomfortable accepting it. (p. 523)

Then she joins a reserve medical corps, travelling from village to village two days a week with supplies of multi-vitamin tablets, anti-malarial tablets and milk powder along with her relation Tipu and a young doctor. She visits every household taking particular care to enquire after young mothers, noting down their health conditions. She also keeps writing articles for Kunal's magazine 'New Light'. Bhodra also writes poetry as the young Irish soldier O'Neill discovers in the periodical 'Aruna'. Through all her work, remunerative or otherwise Bhodra brings her concerns and emotions into the public realm and creates a constructive response that has an impact on the lives of the people around her. Bhodra and Deboki are both sensitive and private people who use their painful experiences to bring to their work a deep commitment and compassion.

Ketoki, Deboki's sister is more fortunate than her elder sister as she is able to study further than Deboki had been. She comes to Calcutta to study after her matriculation and lives with her maternal uncle's family. The same deprivation had structured Deboki and her childhood but Ketoki reacts differently to her poverty. She gets frustrated with their impoverished lifestyle when living with Deboki and despises her parents' straitened circumstance. On her own part she is resolved to do whatever it will take her to live a 'better' life. One night when it starts raining heavily and water literally pours through the roof of Deboki's ramshackle hut, the two sisters crawl under their wooden bed and spend the night there. Deboki starts laughing at the ridiculous scene of two women crouching under the bed and Ketoki gets very irritated at her sister's laughter. When Kunal visits Deboki and she feeds him the simple fare that she can afford, Ketoki is embarrassed. She finds a job as a secretary with a distant relation Dulal Dutta and uses her position to buy a way out of poverty. She is a beautiful woman and she uses that to attract Dulal. He in turn finds Ketoki's beauty a useful business tool and makes use of it in his dealings with

the rich trader Sukhanlal. Ketoki tells Deboki that Dulal and she plan to marry. Deboki is appalled and tells Ketoki to think about his wife and the four children. Ketoki retorts that she is not so foolish to place the well-being and happiness of others before her own. She gets married to him secretly only to find that for Dulal she was a business asset. He prostitutes her body to keep clients and win contracts. After two years of abuse and exploitation she comes back to live with Deboki. Deboki notices that the same Ketoki who could not spare a thought for others sits and knits for others all day long. Ketoki's work, in a very different way from Deboki's work, had transformed her almost beyond recognition. She appears to be a broken woman.

The two happily married women in the novel make almost reverse journeys; Meghi comes to the city from the village while Lota goes to the village from the city. A Brahmin widow, Meghi leaves the village as it is impossible for her to marry Ali, a Muslim peasant and live in the village. Though Meghi takes up the nursing job to supplement Ali's income as a machineman in a Press, when Deboki visits her for the first time, she perceives a transformed personality. The same Meghi, perennially bent low by widowhood and the taunts of a harsh mother, looks tall and confident as she greets Deboki smilingly:

> That Brahmin girl Meghidi, always seen attired in a widow's white, was now wearing canvas shoes, a black border sari, with a nurse's cap clipped to her hair. That scared and trembling girl's face was now sporting an unembarrassed joy. (p. 302)

These two village girls, Meghi and Deboki, no longer seem to be apologetic about their existence in this world. They realise that there is nothing intrinsic about being dependent and helpless and one can change one's circumstance by standing up and fighting for it. Meghi and Ali conduct their life as partners, each helping the other out in domesticity and in work. When Meghi talks to Ali about the exploitation of the ayahs at the hospital it is Ali who advises Meghi that they should form a union. Then again when Ali loses his job, Meghi and Deboki ask Kunal to help Ali out and Ali gets a new job at the New Light Press. As mentioned earlier, Meghi and Deboki work together to improve the living conditions of Sushila and the other ayahs and their children. Meghi's life

has undergone a radical transformation through the duration of the novel and while getting married to Ali brings her a lot of happiness, her designation as a nurse, the money she earns and the service that she renders as part of her job is extremely significant with regard to her confidence in herself and her self esteem. She has finally acquired an identity that makes her happy and proud.

For Lota life is a bitter-sweet struggle as she accompanies Sulokkhon after her wedding in Calcutta to the village where he has elected to work. They go to live in Sulokkhon's ancestral house, as he will be working with the peasants and the factory workers in that area. Lota's primary duties are as a daughter-in-law of the household. While Lota shares a wonderful relationship with her husband and has a lovely child, she finds it quite difficult to brave the poverty that Sulokkhon's political work entails. He takes up a private tuition to meet the basic expense of the family but it is not adequate. Lota respects her husband's work but is frustrated because she cannot feed her son properly or get him proper medicine when he is ill. She feels particularly helpless when her aging aunt who brought her up writes to her saying that her nephew has not sent her money for the last two months. She does not ask Lota to help her financially but Lota realises that it is not possible for her aunt to ask more explicitly:

> 'My arthritis has been quite bad for the past some time. To compound it all, the nephew who used to send me ten rupees every month has not sent anything for the last two months. He has not replied to my letters. Hence, I am quite anxious. Only God is my saviour now.
>
> My blessings for you.
> Yours,
> Pishima.' (p.401)

Sulokkhon is unable to provide for her aunt at this hour of her need and in his frustration he tells Lota that she knew his condition when she married him. It was still not too late for her to rectify her mistake. Lota is shocked beyond belief at Sulokkhon's answer. Yet this same Lota does a lot of work amidst the women and children of the village. She teaches the little ones and runs an

organisation for women. Amidst all her poverty, she sells her necklace to buy a singer sewing machine for the organisation. As Partho tells her, the objective is to encourage the women to earn something for themselves. Once they gain their confidence in their abilities they will not be scared of countering the abuse that they normally put up with in their households. It is a small beginning with a radical potential.

In her novels Sabitri Roy's liberal male communist workers often stress the importance of the involvement of women in waged work, suggesting after Engels that this will liberate the women from their drudgery in the household and provide them with the ammunition to resist exploitation within the family. However through the lives of the female characters Roy illustrates that what sounds good in theory does not work equally well in practice. The male comrades are also complicit as they do not perceive that women in their own families cannot escape housekeeping and that they themselves use and abuse the sympathy of the wives and mothers. Through her characters Roy engages in a debate about familial roles and motherhood and daily work like cooking. There is an occasion in *Paka Dhaner Gan* when Partho and Tipu sit down for lunch and Bhodra and Maloti serve them the food they have cooked. Tipu comments that often cooking is the only medium available to Indian women to express their selfhood, just as artists express themselves through painting, authors writing and actors through acting. Bhodra disagrees and says that when women feed all and sundry, they express their innate maternal love for all. Tipu cautions about laying too much emphasis on maternal instincts. He points out that if we assume motherhood to be innate, then fatherhood should also be the same. Yet society has created this myth of the maternal that has consumed all facets of a woman's identity. It is possible for a woman to be many things besides being a mother. Partho asks Maloti, shouldn't women have the right to express their selfhood in other ways? Maloti feels that a woman's self is nurtured through the blossoming of a family. Partho argues that ninety percent of women are dissatisfied with performing these chores day in and day out. For the women who work as servants in the kitchens of others, there is little satisfaction to be got out of cooking and feeding. They do the work simply because they need to survive.

Partho and Tipu imply that like motherhood, cooking is glorified to keep women trapped within certain identities, which prevents other aspects of their personality from finding expression. At the same time men like Partho and Tipu are complicit in this circumscribing of women's lives. As Tipu quips in the end, freeing women from these roles would mean that they would have to rest content eating only mashed potatoes and rice. (pp. 623-625). As *Subornolota* illustrates, even that was beyond the culinary skill of most men. (pp. 188-191).

While Partho, Tipu, Sulokkhon are liberal enough to suggest that women should be able express the multiple facets of their self, they do not facilitate that by breaking the boundaries of their masculine role playing. They do not take over or share equally the domestic work. Also cooking per se is not degrading or limiting and sometimes women do enjoy cooking for others and they put a lot of effort into that. The novels are replete with examples of women from all sorts of backgrounds pleased to feed family, friends and strangers. Through this debate Roy is probably trying to explore the various dimensions of the issue, revealing that there is no one way of reading the act of cooking. It can be drudgery, an art, an expression of love, compassion and humanity, a marketable skill and so on. When Doyaboti and Torulota offer to cook at the relief kitchen for the starving people in *Meghna Podma*, it is not simply a maternal outpouring but also the act of compassionate humane beings. Roy's treatment of the issue of cooking reveals how complex the entire area of women's work is.

Meghna Podma is largely the story of Indrokumar and Torulota and their four children, sons Kripan, Kishan, Tuphan and daughter Bonya. The narrative begins in an east Bengal village enveloped by the great rivers Meghna and Podma. It is a landowning family that has now lost much of its wealth and former status. Still the retainers and other villagers love and respect the family. Torulota, as indeed the rest of the family are very proud of the boys, who are talented and intelligent individuals. Torulota's parents are quite wealthy and she hopes that her sons will restore her husband's family to its former glory. Kripan is a good student and performs very well in his exams and the family hopes great things from him. Bonya, the only girl among the

siblings is expected to marry early and raise a family. Her education is cursory and her guardians do not pay much attention to her studies or probe into her other abilities. Her mother despises her and Bonya is aware of it. However, at the same time she is an imaginative and dreamy child and perhaps that is what cloaks and shields her from her mother's hatred and general indifference of the family towards her. In the event she goes to Calcutta for her higher education and soon moves out of her guardian's house to live with a friend. She also gives tuition privately, which takes care of all her expenses in Calcutta. It is her first job and it makes her independent of her parents financially and also to an extent from any authoritarian control. She asks her father for permission to spend the holiday with her friend's family but her day-to-day movements and activities cannot be regulated by anyone any more. Later she takes on a job as a school teacher when she realises that she will not be able to go to the university for further studies. Both the teaching jobs are for her own survival, so that she can live independently without depending on anyone for financial support, and also to fund her deepest interest, her art. Bonya's passion is painting. She perceives herself as an artist, not a teacher. From the neighbourhood potter, to Meghjit and then Jyotirmoy, Bonya found her own teachers and learnt the skills and secrets of the art form by herself without any interest or encouragement from her family. Her art is an alternate world for her as well as being a vehicle for self-realisation. When her mother asks her to take up a job, she thinks,

> If she should jettison the anchor of colours and the full sail of her brushes, who will be her trusted boatman to ferry her through the open seas? (Vol. III, p. 12)

The parallel that can be drawn between Bonya's artistic endeavours and that of someone like Sarala Devi Choudhurani is interesting. Sarala Devi was a talented musician but her family did not encourage her to hone her talent. Though they did not discourage her nor prevent her in any way from following her musical inclination, she writes in her memoir *Jiboner Jhorapata* that a child's talent is like a taper that waits to be lit. If a child lacks parental encouragement then that talent cannot burn brightly in all its brilliance. She felt that she could not make the full use of her musical and other talents

because she lacked the support of her parents and relations.[187] Her creative self was pushed into the background as Sarala immersed herself in social and political work. However, the young Bonya pursues her creative urge with single-minded devotion, trying to transform every space that she inhabits. She does not wait for anyone to understand her abilities and encourage her. She simply forges her own path despite all the difficulties that she comes across. She does not articulate about the lack of encouragement. She is lonely and she creates her lone space but she is not self centred or even self indulgent. She talks about withdrawing from the petty world yet at the same time she is a warm person and reaches out to whoever needs a helping hand. She keeps house for Kripan and Irani when Irani is unwell after her pregnancy, but she leaves as soon as things are back to normal to live in a rented house. Her work as a teacher is a means to create and preserve an independent space where she can shut out the unsavoury aspects of family life, the pettiness and power politics, and create her art. This work is intensely personal but it is also social. The posters that she paints for the theatre group touring for famine relief demonstrates her link with the world around her. At the same time she is also emotionally attached to her family and feels sorry for her proud mother trying to survive as a refugee with her younger siblings. She herself gives shelter to her niece Sushana and a young man who is absconding from the police for his political activities. When her mother falls ill Bonya goes to stay and nurse her back to health. It is then that her mother requests her to take up a clerical job that an acquaintance can get her, for the survival of the family. Torulota also asks Bonya to give up her own rented accommodation and come and stay with Torulota and her brothers, nieces and nephew.

Bonya does not move in with her family but she agonises over her responsibility as a daughter and sister and what she owed herself and her calling. It is in this treatment of Bonya's agony that Sabitri Roy is radical. Roy makes this character as detached and individualistic as possible for a woman to be in a family and middle class Hindu society, who decides to thrive despite the indifference, hatred and numerous obstacles. What is perhaps more

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[187] Sarala Devi Choudhurani, *Jiboner Jhorapata*, p.32.

important is that she is conscious of her individual self and her autonomous identity as an artist, far removed from her familial identity:

> There is no way of denying to herself that she is like a traveller in an inn. No home has been made for her around any courtyard in this world. Not a daughter, nor a bride – who is it that has lit a lamp within her? ... People of the world want to see her as a homely daughter, a sister, and a bride. But the true self that Bonya has seen within her depths, if her mother had perceived that self even for a day, she would have felt content. It is heavenly to discover this self-identity. (Vol. III, pp. 13-14)

This is a self that creates the beautiful and worships it too. This self is the consummate artist that transmutes the good and the bad and the painful experiences into colours and forms that rival the creation of the almighty. When the appeal is made to her familial identities, Bonya finds that instead of *sundor* or beauty in art, now her quest must be for *kolyan* or well being of others. It is a difficult and excruciatingly painful transformation of the self, which has Omlan comparing her to the emaciated Uma doing penance to obtain Shiva. Bonya perceives while working in her mother's house that she has brought happiness to the family members, a measure of hope that things will be all right, be it the running of the household or the straitened finance. She feels that after a long time her mother has discovered a daughter, her brothers a sister and her niece and nephew an aunt:

> But the Bonya that this Bonya is looking for is nowhere to be found in the interiors of her mother's house, or without, in the verandah, and the courtyard. Nowhere is that Bonya who had walked alone across a cold, bleak landscape. (Vol. III, p. 15)

As Bonya tussles with the difficult choices that she must make she dreams a lonely naked baby that she is carrying with her, trying to protect it from all harm. And then an arrow pierces the heart of the baby and every motionless cell of Bonya's body cries out. Her body feels frozen and dark. Then there is another dream of brilliant flowers growing on a grave. Bonya knows that the baby is her innermost self, the artist and it is on the grave of the self that the happiness of the family can bloom. Here, Bonya's job is not a measure of her liberation but of renewed bondage. Like the refugee woman Nita in Ritwick

Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, this work signifies the sure smothering and gradual death of the selfhood of the woman in service of the family. Nita and Bonya's identities as waged workers are an extension of their familial identity. It was another way of selling their body for monetary gains till disease (tuberculosis in the case of Neeta), exhaustion or old age claimed them.

Bonya's identity as a daughter and a sister accepts that she has to do some other work apart from cooking and nursing for her mother, making arrangement for fuel by mixing coal dust and cowdung, getting Malini from her school. When Bonya gets her salary she goes to give it to her mother. As the interviews that Gargi Chakravarti conducts in *The Trauma and the Triumph* reveal, for many refugee women waged work connoted a sacrifice that the women made, to meet the spiralling demands of the family that had to build everything from scratch. In one interview Bithi Chakravarti recounts her trials. She belonged to a nationalist landowning family in Mymensingh district in Bangladesh and was barely 14 at the time of partition. She struggled hard to educate herself and then took over the entire responsibility of the family comprising her parents, three brothers and three sisters. She waited for thirteen years to settle all her siblings before she got married to the person she loved.[188] Then there was Sukumari Chaudhuri who was widowed in the Noakhali riots and was then sent over to Calcutta to protect her as well as to enable her to earn her own living. She received training from the Nari Seva Sangha and then joined Bengal Lamp, fixing filaments to the bulbs. Not only did Sukumari work there but she also got involved in the trade union movement and fought for the rights of the other workers, many of who were refugees.[189] In her work on refugee women in the erstwhile refugee colonies Rachel Webber writes about how many elderly women, who came in as young refugees and had to take up waged work to make ends meet, are not proud of what they did and reluctant to dwell on their careers as working women. In the next generation many of the daughters do not work because there was no 'need'. (p. 76). From the liberal perspective it may seem baffling why women are unwilling to take up waged work that will make them

[188] Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), pp.150-154.
[189] *Ibid.*, pp. 143-149.

'independent'. However, this apparent 'regressive' move becomes clear when seen from the perspective of the women themselves who worked for the requirement of the family and ceased to work when that requirement was no longer there.

This work was never about their personal independence, be it in terms of space, decision-making, access to economic resource or any other such personal goals. They functioned as the 'reserve' labour force for the family as well as for the state, which found it difficult to bear the financial burden for the increasing number of refugees pouring into the state. There is an indication of the substantial number of such office-going middle class women amongst whose number Bonya became one, in a description of some women waiting at a bus stop in the rain:

> As soon as she gets down from the bus it starts pouring again. She takes shelter beneath the tin shed of a corner shop. A few other girls, evidently Saturday office-returnees, are crowding beneath the same shed.... Everyone's bottom half of the saree is soaking wet. The plastic vanity bags slung from the arms are a telltale sign that these are '10 to 5' women as well. (Vol. III, pp. 25-26)

It is difficult to say if women would perceive their wage earning role differently in a different economic system, but in this system at any rate not all middle class women perceived waged work as emancipatory. In the case of Bonya it appears that when she worked as a school teacher, which probably paid her less, she felt more in control of her life though it was in all respects a hard life with minimal amount of clothing and food. She was free to explore her potential as an artist and a human being, which she is unable to do when working as a clerk to keep her family. So it would be simplistic to assume that waged work can catapult a woman into a better level of existence, greater self-esteem and respect from family and community. Though of course when the family needs the wages, the daughters/wives/mothers are better treated. Torulota's relationship with Bonya undergoes a change when Torulota's sons cannot meet the needs of the family. The two elder sons Kripan and Kishan are in financial difficulties and Kripan's children Malini and Mollar are being

looked after by the widowed Torulota. As she comes to rely on Bonya's assistance more and more, Torulota becomes a mellowed mother and there is a role reversal. Bonya recalls that her mother had never been her shelter when she was a child and now the same mother looks to her for shelter and comfort. Bonya is unable to be as harsh to her mother as her mother had been to her.

For the family Indrokumar's death and partition come at almost the same time and Torulota finds herself at the head of the family with her eldest son Kripan not being able to take the responsibility. When his marriage to Irani breaks down Kripan goes off the rails and gives up his job. The youngest son Tuphan leaves his studies, and to ensure that he is able to pursue his education and Kripan's children can be fed and educated, Torulota requests Bonya to take up the clerical job. The entire family has become refugees now, bereft of their large village house, the agricultural land and other immovable property. The different motivations of the individual woman and her family are clearly visible here. For Bonya, her waged labour was a means to move away from her identity that placed her within the locus of the family and create a new one, while her family regards her waged work as an extension of her responsibility towards them as a daughter, sister and aunt. The author seems to suggest that these new individualistic and traditional familial identities cannot coexist within the current family and social structure, and they are in a conflict within the psyche of the woman herself. Bonya or Shita in *Sworolipi* suffer from guilt for those aspects of their lives that are not devoted to the cause of the family, that there is an individual who exists exclusive to the familial self. Consequently when there is a conflict between the familial self and the 'other' solitary self, the snaking guilt ensures that the familial duties are given priority at the cost of annihilation of the 'other' self. There is a strong suggestion by the author that eventually there are no great winners as the psyche of the woman is bruised in the battle. If a Bonya agonises about giving in to her sense of duty as a daughter, an Irani who rejects her marriage and motherhood to find a different identity for herself is equally traumatised.

Irani starts off as a young bride, married to the intelligent and successful Kripan. She is an ambitious homemaker who dresses the home and herself in fineries. A different facet of her life opens up when she is suddenly invited to help with the rehearsal of a play as the lead actor is ill. When she speaks the lines the group realises that she is perfect for the role and Irani becomes the lead actor. There is now a new dimension to Irani's life and while she still dabbles in expensive sarees and jewellery, it does not satisfy her any more. Kripan had thought that he could bind Irani to himself by giving her all that money could buy and becomes desperate when he realises that Irani is still dissatisfied. The theatre group goes on a tour to collect money for the famine-struck starving people and Irani travels with them. It is a hard tour as they travel in difficult conditions, without proper accommodation and food in the biting cold. Yet everyone bears it all cheerfully, and Irani and the rest of the group are overwhelmed at the response their work evokes among the poor hungry peasants. Their reward is the tears in the eyes of the audience when they bid the actors good-bye. For the first time in her life Irani finds herself doing work that satisfies her creative instinct while releasing her from a petty circumscribed life of looking pretty and entertaining guests.

Her work within the home and her work as an actor among the people bring out two diametrically opposite facets of her personality, so much so that it seems they are two characters: a selfish pleasure loving, insensitive petty woman and a socially conscious artist cheerfully bearing all difficulties and helping out others. Theatre work is not remunerative and Irani does not earn financial independence with her acting. But this work changes her life in more ways than one. For one it enables her to abandon her role as a homemaker, wife and mother, as she is able to put these roles in perspective from her public role as an artist. There is probably a realisation that wifehood and motherhood need not necessarily be her destiny. She is also able to triumph over her mother's training of her as a woman who must grab all she can and wallow in the power that being the beloved wife of a wealthy husband can bring. From the perspective of the author, the Irani that we see at the beginning of the novel is her mother's creation, literally her mother's daughter. When she leaves Kripan's home, not only does she break with her familial

roles as wife and mother, she also makes a break with her role as a daughter under the control of the mother.

> You had wanted me like a commodity - my beautiful body. The expensive saris, jewellery, car and house were opiates you used to try and drug my consciousness. Your possessiveness was so fierce because you regarded me as your property. That is why you were so jealous. That is why you were so afraid that someone would take way what belonged to you.
> ... To meet her own ends my mother had also restricted the growth of my inner being like the Chinese bind the feet of their women. She has no son. She had thought we sisters would meet her material needs in future. (p. 275)

It is difficult for her, particularly, to leave the young children Malini and Mollar behind. Yet the claustrophobia that her role as a wife brings on propels her to seek out a wider horizon as an artist. When she marries again she marries a poet and playwright, not at all a wealthy man by Kripan's standards, who is also a Muslim. So her work as an actor radically changes Irani's life, restructuring her world, her roles, and her consciousness.

There was another section of women whose lives were changed through work, but in this case it was remunerative work. Single, orphaned and abandoned women like Sutara in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* gave a different shape to their life and identity through their profession. Sutara like Sumitra in *Sworolipi* is a college lecturer. She is compelled to acquire another identity as she is pushed out of the fold of the family. Sutara seeks to earn a living, as she does not want to be dependent on her brothers. Her work is about survival and also about escaping from the ignominy of accepting money from those relations who would rather she got lost or died in the communal violence that claimed the life of her parents and sister. She is not encouraged to seek a career by her relations for whom a woman working for her wages was still a novelty. They are quite perplexed as to what they should do with her. Sutara herself determines without asking anyone that she should be independent financially, for she was her own guardian in every other respect, as everyone else had relinquished his or her responsibility for her. So she applies for the lectureship at Yajnaseni College and travels to Delhi to accept the job.

Ironically, living in Delhi amongst the Punjabi refugees gives her a sense of an identity as one of a community of refugees, sharing between themselves a sense of loss, homelessness and loneliness. It would appear that when she lived in Calcutta in the school hostel away from her surviving relations, she existed in a state of limbo. Deprived of any familial identity, with her parents dead and her brother shying away from accepting her as a sister, her identity is constructed of negations, with the acute feeling of existing in a social vacuum. So in a strange way her profession is also about enabling her to acquire an identity, for her own as well as for social consumption. From the social perspective she is responsible and respectable as a member of one of the honoured professions. Her students know her as the lecturer of History, Miss Dutta. For the other lecturers living in the building, she is a colleague. When she meets some of the women who identify themselves as refugees, she identifies herself as belonging to this community of refugees. Some of them get together to go on a pilgrimage and Sutara finds herself as one of a community of single women, who are their own guardian.

One of the more intangible things that Sutara acquires from her work is self-confidence. She is first seen in the novel as a baffled, bruised and rejected girl, who has recently lost her parents to violence and who has been cast aside by the rest of the family as a soiled article of clothing. Whenever she tries to enter the fold of the family, she is quickly pushed away in fear that her taint of having been touched by and having lived with Muslims will taint the rest of the family. This same girl, who sought relationships with her kin, finds the courage to reject the proposal of her friend Sakina's mother, to get married into their family when she is working in Delhi. Such a marriage would have given Sutara a familial identity, a sense of belonging and a home that she craved for. It is difficult to guess how Sutara would have reacted had she not had a job and been forced to live with constant humiliations in the homes of her relations, but now that she does not need to survive on scraps or somebody's pity, Sutara is able to say no to a proposal that she is repelled by emotionally. She is grateful to Sakina and her family because they saved her life and cared for her when her parents died. However as members of a

community they are touched by the communal violence that destroyed her family and nearly destroyed her life. By rejecting Sakina's mother's offer, Sutara rejects patriarchal and nationalist politics that appropriates and constructs communal identities on women's bodies, through abductions, rape and marriages. Her social position accruing to her by virtue of her profession as well as her financial independence certainly contributes to a position of strength from where she can negotiate the construction of her identity.

Sutara's work is also important in another way. People like Aziz and Promode grow to respect her. Aziz, as Sakina's brother had known Sutara since her childhood, as his sister's friend and classmate. He had also perceived the frightened and vulnerable girl recovering in their home after the killing of her parents and sister. He was aware of the way she had been received in her brother's family in Calcutta as he had accompanied his father in taking Sutara to her brothers. Bruised, orphaned, unloved, unwanted Sutara had been completely defenceless, at the mercy of the kindness of others. Yet this same Sutara had grown up to be an educated woman, with a position in society as a lecturer and able to hold her own and live her life without relying on the munificence of others. She has the courage to refuse an alliance that is morally and emotionally reprehensible to her, even though materially it has its advantages. Aziz says, 'All I felt was pity for that girl. We all felt sorry for her – homeless and miserable. ... But after what I heard today, that girl has earned my respect.' (p. 101). Her courage in forging her future is probably also instrumental in creating the promise of a relationship with Promode. Promode tells her that when she came to their household from Noakhali with Tamij kaka, Promode and Subha, the two siblings used to discuss about her and they felt sorry for her. Promode is aware of how Sutara has suffered abuse and ostracism twice over from both Muslims and Hindus and he feels complicit in that vicitmisation of Sutara. The young girl he had felt sorry about and about whose mistreatment he had remained silent is now a mature, reserved working woman and Promode sits before her pleading that she try to like them. Promode asks her if she would marry him. Sutara wonders if Promode is making this offer out of charitable emotions and feels sure that she won't accept a relationship based on pity and charity. Sutara had

reconciled herself to a solitary life and Promode's offer is disruptive as it pierces through the desiccated emotional crust and brings to the fore the unresolved trauma that had been buried over the years. Yet, what is positive is the way there has been a reversal. Sutara's scars still remain and there is emotional fragility but instead of feeling sorry for her, Promode seeks her companionship.

It is perhaps significant that Jyotirmoyi Devi's protagonist's salvation in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* comes through education and work. In her own life Jyotirmoyi had understood the value of both. Her own education had been sporadic depending on the whims of the guardians and opportunity. In her short married life she had cooked and done the other household chores, bearing in between six children. Her widowhood at the age of twenty-six had created a vacuum which is dissimilar and similar to the one experienced by Sutara. The emptiness that Sutara was thrown into resulted from the death of her parents as Jyotirmoyi's was from the death of her husband. However, then Sutara's experience is intensified by the rejection of her by the rest of the family and society. Jyotirmoyi Devi, on the other hand, was taken in by her natal family, but she suddenly felt that she belongs nowhere. As she articulates in her memoir, her existence and identity after her widowhood was composed of negations, as not-wife and not-daughter.[190] Her father could give her refuge but she no longer belonged to that family and in her marital home her stay became more difficult after her husband's death. Jyotirmoyi created a positive identity for herself through her writings. Painstakingly she educated herself, reading voraciously, discussing ideas with friends and relations and writing in periodicals. She brought upon the world stories that highlighted the untold and ignored aspects of women's lives. Quite apart from the financial gains that she might have made from her writings, her work placed Jyotirmoyi in a position where for the first time she was the chronicler and narrator, which is definitely an empowering position. Her writing was the antidote to her sense of absolute loneliness and social isolation as a widow, as also to the sense of helplessness, hopelessness, stasis, despair and a feeling of being

[190] Jyotirmoyi Devi, *Smriti Bismritr Torongo*, pp. 86-89.

superfluous in family and society. In fact her writing provides Jyotirmoyi the opportunity to choose and create her identity, a liberating change from having identities given or being thrust upon her. Both Jyotirmoyi and Sutara's work enable them to re-create their selves when their familial identities had been shorn away from them.

In Ashapurna Devi's *Bokulkotha,* Bokul also provides herself with an alternate identity through her writing. Bokul, unlike Jyotirmoyi and Sutara does not lose her familial identities, but through the creation of an alternate identity she is able to pare down the familial identities almost to a state of nothingness. She hasn't married and while she stays in the family home, there is a physical distance between her and her brothers and their families, as Bokul lives away from them, on her own, on the top floor. This physical distancing symbolises an emotional distancing from the family as also a retreat from her identity as a daughter of the family. Ironically the room at the top of the house that Bokul makes her own is her inheritance. Even when she is a highly successful author, she chooses to stay on in that room when she can afford to move out. Unknown to others, her inheritance is also Subornolota's dreams, frustrations and pains, and the neglect and derision of the rest of the family. Her brothers and sisters-in-law are envious of Bokul's success and her inaccessibility. There was a time when the brothers could hurt and crush Bokul by their taunts and humiliating remarks. Now, as a celebrated author, Bokul has grown so much that she has outstripped her brothers and whatever they say they cannot bring her down to their level. It is as if when Bokul established herself as an author, emotionally she cast away those aspects of her identity that she perceived to be unnecessary and retarding and constricting. She has a sustaining relationship with Parul and Shompa, who are her sister and niece respectively, but these are relationships not weighed down by their blood ties. These ties are those of warm mature women who connect with each other and support each other, without trying to intrude or regulate each other's lives.

Parul, unlike Bokul, is not a poet professionally but it is the core of her identity, which frustrates her husband, as he cannot fathom this core. Even when Parul is not writing poetry, she is a poet, which informs her perception of

those around her and life itself. Her husband may compel her to stop writing but he or society itself cannot mutate her identity as a poet into something more malleable and familiar. It is this core of her self that has always enabled Parul to wear the familial roles as loose fitting garments that can be easily slid out of to create a more compassionate and humane world. Subornolota also wrote, and as long as she could write with her expectation that this story would go out to the world at large, she is happier than she has ever been after her marriage. However a publishing fiasco ensures that her words die a traumatic death. Unlike her daughters, with Subornolota her creative and literary self could never triumph over the familial roles that were imposed on her. She is continually compelled to be a crusader, which rarely leaves her with the time and space to engage her literary sensibilities. While Bokul and Parul create alternate worlds in fiction and poetry, Subornolota tries to rid the living world of the home of its maladies. She is the rebel within, too involved in the practicalities of her living to be able to transcend the familial sphere and explore her other potentials. Her youngest daughters learn from her life to come up with strategies that will help them to escape being trapped by their familial identities. Bokul has an advantage over both her mother and sister in that she is a professional writer, earning her living by writing fiction. Her financial independence gives her a bargaining position within the household that her brothers resent and it allows her to take decisions about her own life.

Bokul chooses to live a conventional life, as a single woman within a household, mindful of the conduct that was expected of her as a single woman and as a well-known author. What is important is that it is her choice and she has earned that position where she can make decisions without being dictated to. Subornolota is a rebel and Parul is subversive but they do not have that liberty of choosing the lives they will lead as they lack access to finances. As Bina Agarwal has noted, with no occupation that has a remunerative value, no access to property except the jewellery and utensils that are settled on her at the time of her wedding, the bargaining position of

many middle class women within the household were severely affected.[191] However, even without the financial resources, Ashapurna suggests, what is important is a woman's will. Even with her social position and financial independence, Bokul has never rebelled against the family and its norms. On the other hand her niece Shompa starts out to script her individual life without any material possessions or money, simply relying on her indomitable will. Shompa replicates the spirit of her great grandmother Sotytoboti who also left home to find a meaning to her own life without any resource. Both Shompa as her great grandmother Sotyoboti subsequently go on to take up waged work to preserve their independence, and to earn their livelihood. Ashapurna seems to suggest that the will of the women must couple with their access to financial resource for them to be able to choose and create their identities.

Conclusion

In these novels the authors illustrate the complex nature of women's work and the ramification of these diverse activities on a woman's identity. It becomes apparent that to categorise women's work as either household work or waged work is rather simplistic. The same work when undertaken by two different people can be seen to function differently in shaping the self-perception of the people concerned. Analysis of the work done by the various female characters in the novels reveal that apart from these two broad types of household and waged work, women also invest a considerable amount of time and energy in non-remunerative charitable, political and/or social work, and in other kinds of work because it gives them pleasure or they are personally interested in it. The nature of the work depends on the circumstance in which the woman works. Thus, waged work taken up for the survival of the family in effect gets subsumed as work done for the household, while household work if done for other purposes may be regarded as social work or work done for pleasure. Sabitri Roy in her various novels depicts how a mundane household chore like cooking can be differently perceived when done by different people in different circumstances. Similarly when Bonya

[191] See Bina Agarwal, pp.185-192. Agarwal points out that utensils, jewellery, and sometimes small animals are the only assets possessed by women. Once these are disposed off women have nothing to fall back on. This makes them especially vulnerable during severe calamities such as famine, when families may themselves begin to fragment and disintegrate.

works as a clerk for her family it gets subsumed in her domestic role as a daughter and sister but her earlier work, as a teacher, is solely waged work undertaken to maintain her independent household. So waged work functions differently in different cases and its operation in the politics of identity varies markedly according to the circumstance in which it is taken up, among other factors.

This leads also to the conclusion that in many cases women's undertaking of waged work is perceived to be an extension of their nurturing role within the family and for the family. Theoretically waged work may be regarded as empowering for women, enabling them to counter their exploitation by the patriarchal family through their access to financial resources. Many of the male communist activists in the novels espouse this notion. But in reality this perception is seen to be problematic as the family uses the wages for its own survival and improvement. Waged work merely signifies increased duties and responsibilities for the woman. Many women take up waged work due to the straitened circumstances within the family and rarely is it perceived as an individual choice or career option. However, on the reverse side, waged work provides material security for the women and boosts their self-esteem, leading them increasingly into active, 'instrumental' roles, where they extend the boundaries of their work creating an impact on the lives of those around them.

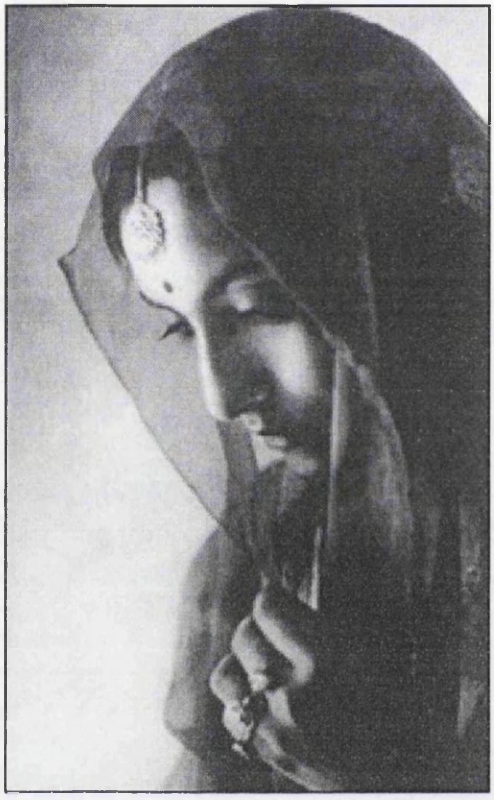
Waged work undertaken by women in the novels is largely limited to a few areas like teaching and nursing with a few instances of women making radical career choices like acting in theatre groups and films. However, what is more interesting in terms of the shaping of the identities of the women is the wide ranging non-remunerative work that they are engaged in which is as important and sometimes more important than remunerative work. Artistic endeavours like Bonya's paintings, Irani's acting, Deboki's singing and Bokul's writing are empowering and liberating as are Sagori's political activism and Bhodra's political writings and translations. Quite often these activities are defining in the lives of these women.

The novels also demonstrate the strong socialisation into familial roles that prove to be a primary factor in framing the identities of women. The individualism of strong women like Shita, Deboki and Bonya contends hard against the socialisation that compels them to first fulfil the responsibility that their familial roles entail. Quite often the familial identities are accorded primacy over the other facets of the self and they eventually structure the lives of the women. It is perceived to be selfish to indulge the non-familial aspects of their identity, and the women tend to sacrifice their aspirations and potentials to fulfil their responsibilities as daughters, wives and mothers.

Interestingly, the novels also portray an overwhelmingly large number of women as the main breadwinner of the family, even if they are not heading the families as single women. Even though Bhodra's father-in-law would be regarded as the head of the family as would be Dinobondhu, Deboki's father, in reality the household is run on Bhodra and Deboki's earnings. Similarly Shita and Bonya run the two families where the eldest member are the mother-in-law and mother respectively. Then again there are single women who earn their own livelihood, choosing not to depend on relations for their upkeep, like Sumitra and Sagori, and Sutara. While it is not possible to estimate the extent of the prevalence of families headed or run by women, the novels suggest that the political and economic situation thrust on many women the additional responsibility of earning for the survival of the family, and in cases where the women were alone or abandoned, for their own survival.

Through the portrayal of the diverse work that women do, these novels indicate the multi-faceted nature of the 'becoming' of middle class Hindu woman in Bengal during this period in the twentieth century. While the impact of waged work remains debatable and problematic in the context of the time, family and social structure and women's lives, the radical nature of much of the other non-remunerative work women were doing brought forward non-familial and marginalised dimensions of the middle class Bengali woman's identity, and paradoxically created a sense of empowerment and independence.

Chapter 5: Becoming Good Wives and Mothers: The Bengali Woman in Family and Society



Portrait of Manobina Roy, Ramnagar, 1936

Prints from copy negatives, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, photo archive, Calcutta.

Source collection: Debaleena Majumder

Malavika Karlekar, *Visualizing Indian Women 1875-1947 (New Delhi: OUP 2006)*

Foreword: placing Bengali women in the family and community

We sit still, letting the cloth grow
a little closer to our skin,
A light filters inward
through our bodies' walls.
Voices speak inside us,
echoing in the spaces we have just left.

She stands outside herself,
Sometimes in all four corners of a room.
Wherever she goes, she is always
inching past herself,
as if she were a clod of earth,
and the roots as well,
scratching for a hold
between the first and second rib.

(*Purdah I* by Imtiaz Dharker, in Kaiser Haq (ed.) *Contemporary Indian Poetry* (Ohio State University, 1990))

In her poem *Purdah I* Imtiaz Dharker begins by saying that 'One day they said/ she was old enough to learn some shame. / She found it came quite naturally.' In Bengal young girls were taught that *lojja* or shame is the primary ornament that a *stri* (woman) wears. Bengali women as indeed women in the rest of India learnt that the family honour and their shame were inextricably linked. The ramification of this relationship was made gruesomely evident during the riots following the declaration of the partition of India when women were shamed by abductions and rapes, both real and potential, and family honour was sought to be redeemed by killing off the women, sometimes physically and at other times by erasing them from the familial narratives and memory.[192] Paradoxically, the understanding of shame changed quite dramatically for both men and women when they came into new countries as

[192] Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), pp. 32-54. There is the testimony of Durga Rani who says, 'We saw many who had been raped and disfigured... Their families said, 'How can we keep them now? Better that they are dead.' Many of them were so young – 18, 15, 14 years old – what remained of them now? Their 'character' was now spoilt. One had been raped by ten or more men - her father burnt her, refused to take her back.' Then there were other women who were poisoned, strangled or burnt to death, put to the sword or drowned, in incidents that were described as voluntary suicides to prevent their and the community's 'dishonour'.

refugees or 'displaced people'.[193] In those same families where women were *osuryomsporsa* i.e those who have been untouched by the sun, who maintained *porda* even from the men folk in their own family, they found themselves standing in queues before ration shops, communal drinking water taps, joining in marches to demand adequate relief supplies, fighting police and thugs to protect their precarious, *kuchcha* (temporary) homes on *jobordokhol* (forcibly occupied) land, and making the rounds of *office para* (neighbourhoods where there are many offices) to find a basic job that would keep their families from starvation and death.[194] It is an image that has been preserved memorably by Ritwick Ghatak in his film *Meghe Dhaka Tara.*

The notion of *lojja* and *somman* (honour) that so defined the life of middle class Hindu Bengali women brings us to the sphere of the family and community where these concepts were nurtured and took root. In this chapter I examine the paradoxical relation Bengali women shared with their family and community. The family is the primary sphere of influence and identity formation in a child's life. In the case of many middle class Bengali girls in the early twentieth century this would be the only sphere that they would know, limited as they were by the community's notion of *porda* that meant that women should not venture out of the *ondormohol* (inner quarters). For many others who had only three or four years of schooling before they were married off, the family continued to exert the maximum influence on their sense of the self. As we see in *Nobankur*, all the girls in the village *pathsala* except for Chhobi take the school to be a place to bide their time before their parents marry them off. Education at the *pathsala* seems to achieve little. Consequently Chhobi's friends like Durga and Basonti do not see themselves as any thing other than someone's daughter who would soon be someone's wife and then a mother. When they meet Chhobi years later when she comes back to the village from her studies in the town, all that these girls want to know is when she will get married. This role-playing in the family and the girls'

[193] Rachel Weber, 'Re(Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta' in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003), pp.59-77.

[194] See Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, particularly the interviews and reminiscences by Nalini Mitra, Sukumari Chaudhuri and Bithi Chakravarti.

perception of themselves in these familial images gives rise to a paradox that seems to have no easy resolution. The paradox is, do Bengali girls/women have families? Or do families have women? It is not one and the same thing. While we analyse familial identities, which are so important in the case of women and for many their only identity, it seems pertinent to understand the nature of the 'membership', the 'belonging' to a family.

To answer this query we need to understand first how the family and its members are perceived in the Hindu Bengali community. In early twentieth century Bengal, individuals were identified by their families and their ancestral place of residence.[195] So it would be common to refer to a person as coming from such and such family from such and such place. Even today, especially when matrimonial negotiations are taking place it is not uncommon to refer to prospective grooms or brides as belonging to some well-known family coming from particular district or village. Largely what was regarded as important was the membership of a family rather than the individual himself or herself. Sometimes when marriages were fixed any shortcoming in the individual, particularly in case of prospective grooms, would be overlooked if the family was well known and distinguished in terms of wealth, social prestige and so on. Sukumar Ray depicts this practice in his humorous poem *Sot Patro* (The Suitable Groom) where the thoroughly unsuitable groom's only suitability is his supposed kinship to the royal family of Raja Kansa, who was the wicked uncle of Krishna. Social identity of individuals was derived from the kinship group to which they belonged as in the case of the Tagores of Jorasanko. It was rare for an individual like Rabindranath to emerge, who became so large and important a personality that he carved an individualistic identity that was not entirely dependent on the familial identity or kinship group. However it was

[195] Sudhir Kakar in *The Inner World* (Delhi: OUP, 1978) explains the organisation of the Hindu family and how members saw themselves in respect of the family structure. He says, 'Regardless of personal talents or achievements, or of changes in the circumstances of his own or others' lives, an Indian's relative position in the hierarchy of the extended family, his obligations to those "above" him and his expectations of those "below" him are immutable, lifelong.' Here I am trying to highlight not the hierarchical aspect of the family, though that is vital in our understanding of how gender relations operate within the Hindu family structure, but on the firm positioning of the individual within the family and how membership of a kinship group is the paramount factor in the framing of a person's identity, as accepted by the self and as recognised by the rest of the society.

rare for men and almost unheard of in the case of women to be recognised as individuals in their own right at this point in history. There would of course be men who would break away from the kinship group by the force of their beliefs and convictions and establish their individual identity. Yet for most men their identity as member of a kinship group would be a facet of their identity that would last their lifetime. Identities are of course complex and multifaceted, evolving continually through the lifetime of an individual.[196] It is a contested terrain and the individual's sense of the self undergoes transformation with the multiplicity of experiences.

For women, who lived most, if not all, of their lives within the inner quarters, their experiences were limited as was their sense of who they were and who they could be. Unless extremely imaginative or precocious they could not conceive of an identity that would take them beyond the circumference of the family. Yet their membership of kinship groups and families is something that is rather tenuous. In the natal family, even when they were affectionately received, they would grow up with awareness that they were in a short-stay home and would be soon sent to what was to be their home for the rest of their lives. For young girls this was quite often a traumatic experience as they felt that they were exiled or left to the mercy of strangers who could be quite harsh on them if they failed to do their bidding. It made girls very insecure and we have a very poignant account of the trauma of a little girl in Rassundori Devi's autobiography.[197] The experiences of a young girl in an unfamiliar marital home are also vividly presented in Ashapurna Devi's *Prothom Protishruti* and *Subornolota*. Their daughterhood was temporary and their

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[196] Peter Rob, 'The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.31, No.2 (May, 1997), p. 245. For the issue of identity in the context of India, also see the introduction to David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

[197] Tanika Sarkar, 'A Book of Her Own, A Life of Her Own: The Autobiography of a Nineteenth Century Woman' in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (London: Hurst and Company, 2001). Sarkar quotes Rassundori on getting married: 'I went straight into my mother's arms, crying, "Mother, why did you give me away to a stranger?" Marriage seemed to be a life sentence to the little girl.' "I have been incarcerated within the prison house of this *sansar*. There will be no release for me till the end of my days." Sarkar says, 'When the terrible, unbelievable ordeal of parting arrived, and the little girl lost her home, her birthplace, her mother and every face she had known all her life, *Parameshwara* (God) was the only bit of her old identity that she carried with her from her old life.'

wifehood was a state of being that was uncertain. There were plenty of women like Lotu in *Nobankur* who were not accepted by their husbands and in-laws and they would be driven out of the house. Then there were young widows like Maya in *Nobankur* and Meghi in *Paka Dhaner Gan.* Sometimes the natal family would give them shelter while at other times everybody abandoned them. In such cases they would beg either family to give them shelter in exchange for hard labour or go into prostitution. Only motherhood was likely to grant them a stable sense of identity particularly if the offspring was male. However there were cases when the marital family would appropriate the fruit of a woman's labour and she would be driven out like in *Paka Dhaner Gan* Deboki's son is taken away from her. When one looks at the traditional way of drawing the family tree in Hindu families one perceives the complete exclusion of women. Not represented in her natal family where she is regarded as a guest who will shortly be on her way, nor in the marital family where she is quite literally the lowest of the low, residing on the periphery, Bengali women seem to have passed through life without leaving an imprint anywhere. If a woman finds that she does not have the membership of any family or kinship group, then we have the paradox of women with familial, relational identities yet not belonging to any family. If we recall the incident in *Subornolota* when Subornolota is thrown out of the marital house at night for attending Sotyonarayon pujo at Shyamasundori's house without the permission of the her in-laws, as well as the incident when she goes to her father's house and wants to stay and he says that he cannot keep her, we can appreciate the precariousness of a woman's belonging to any kinship network:

> Suborno had come down from the terrace and was sitting on a step. Suddenly she stood up and said, 'You are also driving me out Baba?'
> 'Driving you out! No, no, what kind of talk is this!'
> Nobokumar said, 'Sadhon are you listening to what your sister is saying?'
> 'Certainly.' Sadhon said, 'but this is not about kindness and generosity. This is about a woman's real home -'
> Real home!
> Suborno laughed, 'The truth of the real home has been found out Dada! A moments trespass, and they tell you to leave. Yet, must I cling to that shelter as my real home?' (pp. 113-114)

This brings us back where we had started, of *lojja* being an integral part of a Bengali woman's identity and the unspeakable loss of family honour that would occur if a woman forgot her sense of shame. It seems a contradiction that a woman's conduct is inextricably linked to the honour of her family when for all practical purpose she does not have the membership of the family. A Bengali woman in the earlier half of the twentieth century certainly belonged to a family and a community, as did many other tangible and intangible things. But the family did not belong to her. In real terms, she was provided food, shelter and clothes for her services to the family but she did not have right to the material resources of the family and played limited or no part in the decision-making process. She was expected to carry out the decisions that were taken on her behalf. It seemed the relationship was about keeping the family honour, maintaining the proprieties, fulfilling responsibilities and carrying out duties. Even in the case of older women, secure in their position as mother of sons, when they appeared to be occupying a position of power, in effect they were the powerful custodians of patriarchal value system that upheld the edifice of patriarchy.

I would contend that in Bengali middle class society women were conceived of as commodities with a use value and a symbolic value. Her use value was calculated in terms of the wealth she could bring in as dowry, the labour she could put in household tasks and her fertility and chastity, which would bring about a pure line of descendants. As a symbol she represented the caste, class and social status of a kinship group, a marker of their honour while also being the marker of the community's honour, a fact that comes across during times of civil crises like rioting and communal violence during the Indian partition and during war. Her use value determined to what extent she would be 'valued' by the family and her symbolic value meant that her body had to be closely supervised so that the family and community honour was not sullied. There is not much difference between a community throwing a pig's carcass into a mosque to sully it and a community of people abducting and raping women from another community. Both actions are meant to insult and defile a community's honour.

Most Indian women make an early acquaintance with the concept of *lojja.* It is the marker of respectability. From the moment of their birth - the attire that covers their bodies, the veil that covers their faces from men and the outside world, the food they eat (particularly as widows), the age they are married by - their entire existence was defined by the concept of *lojja.* And the varied shades of meaning attributed to the word *lojja* arise from a woman's body. A woman had to be ashamed of her body and strive continually to de-face it, through silencing of her voice, the *porda*, and her clothes that made her seem a shapeless mass so that there would not even be a suggestion of a female body. Her sexuality had to be restrained by keeping her in enclosed regulated spaces, by chastising her body if she was a widow through infrequent, insufficient, ritually pure food and hard labour. In other words a woman had to be continually ashamed, of her birth, her existence itself and strive always to deny herself to keep the honour of the family.

In any account of the identity politics that Indian women experienced we must take account of the concept of *lojja* that so pervaded their lives and influenced their decisions (when they were in a position to make it) about themselves. It is apparent also that after the trauma of partition while some notions of *lojja* were enforced, others were done away with due to the exigencies of the time. Families were ashamed about girls who were abducted and raped and refused to talk about them. Even when the zealous state 'rescued' some abducted girls, families refused to acknowledge them or take them back.[198] At the same time, the family honour was not compromised if the wives no longer veiled their faces while carrying about their daily chores on railway platforms and crowded refugee camps and girls went out to earn a living in distant

[198] Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries.* In January Nehru was compelled to make an appeal through the newspapers: 'I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women (who have been abducted) back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help.' After the Noakhali riots Gandhi expressed similar sentiments: 'I hear women have this objection that the Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel that this is a matter of great shame. That woman is as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side.' It became such a grave problem that the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation printed and distributed a pamphlet to educate the public on the subject that said 'as a flowing stream purifies itself and is washed clean of all pollutants, so a menstruating woman is purified after her periods.' (pp. 99-100).

places in the city. For the women it was a traumatic shift and they were ashamed of baring their faces in public, of living in communal spaces, negotiating with strangers and stepping out into the public sphere for work to keep the kitchen fire burning.[199] All that was taboo and dishonourable for them to engage in became *de rigueur* and they found themselves playing unfamiliar roles. From being a burden of a daughter and a dependent wife and mother, they became guardians and principal breadwinners of the family.

Partition quite radically changed the lives of many Bengali women from East Bengal. Even for the others, their lives experienced a measure of change. But wherein were those changes? Did the character and the inner dynamics of the Bengali family experience irrevocable changes? How did the middle class Bengali woman change during the two and a half decades comprising the late and early post-colonial period? Did her self-perception alter and did the social perception of the Bengali woman alter? Was her relationship vis-à-vis the family transformed, if at all? What was the impact of the political and economic turbulence of the period on the 'essential' familial roles of the women? Did different generations of women experience their life-cycle and relationships differently? As I examine the issue of identity politics experienced by Bengali women in the family and community, these are going to be some of the questions that I will be asking. I will examine the myriad identities that the Bengali girl/woman negotiated as she went through her life-cycle.

The changing Bengali Hindu family and the various influences

If we consider the spheres of experience where the politics of identity is played out as concentric rings of influence, then the family and community forms the innermost ring or sphere. While there are always multiple influences on an individual, the family and social influence is the most significant in formulating the self-identity. For Bengali women in the late colonial period, the

[199] Bagchi and Dasgupta. In Weber's essay in *The Trauma and the Triumph*, there is the mention of women who had rarely if ever crossed the threshold of the *ondormohol* being forced to share their space with men, sleeping in the same room as their in-laws and brothers-in-law. They complained to Weber about 'the lack of privacy and of the permeability of the flimsy, split bamboo walls.' The older women who had to work outside the home after Partition were embarrassed about this phase of their life.

family and the kinship network were the first direct mode of influence. With the accessibility of education and the gradual opening out of the public sphere of nationalist politics and waged employment, Bengali women were exposed to other powerful influences that shaped their identity as well. Yet the family remained the core influence in a world experiencing quite radical changes. Even when political leaders like Gandhi were calling the women to dedicate their lives to the cause of the nation, they were careful to emphasise that her first responsibility lay towards her family.[200] They were extraordinary times but the primacy of the family and the familial responsibilities of women continued to hold sway. The individual and individuality has always played second fiddle to familial and social responsibilities in India.[201] In fact individual desires that have veered away from the family, kin and kith network have been variously termed as irresponsible and selfish. While both men and women have had to sacrifice themselvesat the altar of family well being, women have found it a heavy burden to live up to the image of the preserver and custodian of the traditional Bengali family, specially when that entailed a highly supervised, regulated and circumscribed life. Yet to designate the sphere of the family as

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[200] See Reba Som, 'Chitrangada, not Sita: Jawaharlal Nehru's model for gender equation', Occasional Papers, NMML, New Delhi, nd). Som describes how Gandhi was specific about women's role even when he encouraged them to join the Civil Disobedience Movement. She writes, 'Trapped by middle class ideological moorings on sexuality, Gandhi prescribed women's participation in politics within certain social parameters. An ardent believer in woman's householder responsibilities, Gandhi discouraged women with familial roles to join his movement. While advocating equal status and legal rights for women Gandhi at the same time felt that the intrinsic difference between man and woman necessitated a demarcation in the vocations of the two.' See also Karuna Chanana Ahmad, 'Gandhi, Women's Roles and the Freedom Movement' and Sujata Patel, 'Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi', Occasional Papers, NMML, New Delhi. For a different perspective on the issue, read Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi and Women', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.20, Nos.40 and 41, 1985.

[201] In their anthology of essays on 'life histories', *Telling Lives In India; Biography, Autobiography and Life History*, Arnold and Blackburn discuss the issue of the individual and the collectivity in the context of India specifically and South Asia generally. They have noted that in South Asian scholarship it has been generally regarded that identities founded on caste and religion dominated to such a degree that individual agency and a sense of selfhood were marginal to South Asian thought and behaviour. They state the rather stark view put forth by some scholars: in India society was valorized; the individual was not (Dirks 2001:57). During the rest of the introduction they demonstrate how such extreme views are simplistic and the expression of 'individual agency' and 'selfhood' comes through in the life stories. However what ought to be noted in the life histories is how many life stories demonstrate the authors struggling to negotiate their social and familial identity and their individuality. The essay by Sylvia Vatuk, *Hamara Daur-i-Hayat: An Indian Muslim Woman Writes Her Life*, particularly illustrates how Zakira Ghouse walks the tightrope between her individuality and her membership of a clan as the journal where she wrote her impressions was a hand-written one that was circulated only within the large *khandan* (clan).

totally oppressive would be a gross simplification. Women also formed deep and sustaining relationships within the large family network that often sustained them through daily living and in difficult times.

The Bengali Hindu family was not a changeless, homogenous entity. The organisation of it varied in terms of class and caste. While the Brahmos and Bengali Christian families were likely to be more liberal, with the women from such families not being as constrained by *porda* and having greater access to education and the public sphere, in the late colonial period the middle class Bengali Hindu family was experiencing a few changes as well. For one there was the impact of the Brahmo Somaj as mentioned earlier. Though Brahmoism was on the wane in the 1930s and 40s, it influenced the Hindu *somaj* by demonstrating a way of living that was different but could not be dismissed as western. Both converts and those Hindus influenced by Brahmoism brought into Hindu families notions such as affective, companionate marriages, nuclear families, female participation in public life among others and the family had to take cognizance of these notions.

There was also the impact of colonial policies with regard to education, the creation of the native administrative machinery framework and a gradual urbanisation, which worked their changes on the Bengali Hindu middle class family. Whether they accepted or criticised, reacted to or rejected the colonial prescriptions about civilised living, Bengali society was exposed to the colonial ideas about domestic life and domesticity.[202] Simultaneously the

[202] Judith Walsh writes that 'nineteenth-century domestic discourse was created through the dialogue and dialectic of metropole and colony and within each. In the colonies, bourgeois domestic discourse and the practices to which it gave rise were incorporated into the civilising mission of colonialism itself (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 44; Cooper and Stoler 1997,32; Minault 1998, 57). She quotes the Comaroffs: 'No usage was too unimportant, no activity too insignificant to escape the stern gaze of the civilising mission ... The basis of universal civility was bourgeois domesticity' (1992, 44).' (p.13). She further writes, 'English and European homes in the colonies stood as public demonstrations of the virtues of Victorian domesticity; the women who ran them participated in a 'public domesticity' of the empire (David 1999, 569; George 1998, 50-51). There were long popular books like *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), which sold more than two million copies in the first eight years of its publication and then remained in print throughout the twentieth century. There was also *Miss Beecher's Domestic Receipt-Book*, 1846. *The Englishwoman's Domestic magazine* had articles coming in from all over the empire. In 1888, Flora Annie Steel, who had lived in India for twenty years, wrote *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* with her friend Grace Gardiner. This book remained popular for the next twenty years. Walsh then analyses similar

various reform movements that had started in the mid nineteenth century also had its impact on the middle class family. The age of marriage increased for both boys and girls and the disparity in ages between them decreased. So the groom and the bride were likely to be young men and women nearer in age to each other. There were also rare instances when men and women married for love. This was a revelation in Bengali society where marriage was undertaken for two primary reasons: to provide an extra hand to help with the domestic chores and to bring forth a new generation to continue the family line. Even when marriages took place for reasons other than love, men were increasingly looking forward to companionate marriages, as quite often they would be living away from the huge joint family at their place of work. For young men away from the supportive network of their families it became quite important to bond with their wives emotionally and intellectually. Therefore it would not do to have brides in the mould of their mothers or grandmothers.

The late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century witnessed an increase in geographical mobility among young men and in number of urban nuclear families. For educational and professional reasons young men would move to the cities in Bengal and in the rest of the country. As soon as they were settled and financially capable, they would urge their parents to send their young wives to live with them in 'foreign' lands. While parents might not be quite happy with the suggestion, sooner or later they would send the brides away to live with their husbands because the husbands needed someone to cook and clean, and to look after them.[203] The fragmentation of the traditional joint family had begun. Also, with the sons moving away from an agricultural economy, which kept the families together due to the common source of income, the joint family lost its place in the sun. It became possible for young couples to fashion their lives according to their taste and inclination without fearing the strictures of the older generations. Lest it seems from all the discussion so far that in the nuclear family men and women enjoyed 'greater'

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books on domesticity that were written in the vernacular in India like Girijaprasanna Raychaudhri's *Griho Lokkhi* (Calcutta, Gurudas Chatterji, 1888, 2nd ed.), Jayakrishna Mitra's *Romonir Kortobyo* (Calcutta: Giribala Mitra, 1890), Nagendrabala Dasi's *Nari Dhormo* (Calcutta: self published, 1900) among others.

[203] Borthwick, pp. 121-123.

equality in their relationship, I should emphasise that families, even nuclear ones, continued to be unmistakably patriarchal where the wives were expected to do what the husband said. As Judith Walsh has noted, the only change for the young wife was that the reins of authority shifted from the older generation, the father or grandfather-in-law and the mother or grandmother-in-law (to a lesser extent) to the young husband.[204] We see this in an incident cited in her memoir by Keshub Sen's daughter Sunity Devee who was married to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Her husband, who was only two years older than her, expected her to defer to all his wishes. At a gathering when someone asked Sunity Devee why she did not wear pearls, the Maharaja interjected to say that his wife did not wear pearls because he did not allow her to wear them; he preferred her to do what he liked and was not bothered about what other women did.[205]

With these small nuclear units being formed away from the traditional household, the practices within the home also changed. People found that it was not possible to maintain the rituals of purity in the urban set-up. The household space was arranged differently and it was not always possible to segregate the spaces according to their use as pure and impure spaces. The *ondormohol* and *bahirmohol* could not be rigidly demarcated. Hence it also became difficult for the young wives to keep *porda.* If the men were more 'westernised' then the wives would also be expected to socialise with their husband's colleagues and their wives. With western kinds of furniture like chairs, tables, proper bedsteads, and wardrobes coming into use the Bengali home started looking different as well.

However a greater shock was in store for the Bengali family. With the Bengal famine of 1943, the structure of the family was radically weakened, if not broken. Apart from the large-scale deaths in the entire state, there was also considerable desertion of women and children by men. As Paul Greenough

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[204] Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women learned when Men gave them advice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2004), pp. 63-74.
[205] Sunity Devee, *The Autobiography of an Indian* Princess (London: John Murray, 1921), p.81, as cited in Ranjana Harish, *Indian Women's Autobiographies* (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1993), p.19.

has portrayed in his book on the famine, in the free relief centres there were more women recipients than men. There is also the suggestion that families broke down by the fact that the average number of members per family seemed to have decreased.[206] There was also another flow towards cities like Calcutta, as people believed that they would get some relief there. Not only were women forced to stand in queues before ration shops for hours at an end but they also took part in an all women's *bhukha michhil* (march of the hungry people) for the first time in the state's history.[207] As I have pointed out in my earlier chapters women have always been providers for their families but these calamities made visible like never before their provider roles. Particularly for their children they played the life-giving mother once again.

Nothing in their training, their socialisation that starts from the moment of their birth had prepared Bengali women for the roles they were suddenly faced with during the famine and then during partition. They had to unlearn all their notion of feminine propriety and shame to enable their families to survive. They had to reconstruct their identity as middle class respectable Bengali women. Hence the period from 1930-1955 is an interesting one when the political and social turmoil combined with two catastrophic events meant that for Bengali women prescription and reality were often at odds with each other. They had been told that their life was primarily defined by the two roles they had to play, that of a wife and mother. Their girlhood was spent training them for these twin important roles. However at this point towards the middle of the twentieth century they found that their lives encompassed many other roles that they had not been told about or indeed prepared for. They continued to care for the husband and children and served the family but the mode of serving became far more arduous and complicated.

Divergent perspectives on the role of the Bengali woman

The role middle class Bengali women played in famine-struck Bengal or in post partition Bengal as 'displaced' and destitute people was not envisaged in

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[206] Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* (New York, Oxford: O.U.P, 1982), pp.183-236.
[207] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom* (Calcutta: Stree, 2001), pp. 71-72.

a prescriptive book like *Ma o Meye* supposedly written by a woman called Omiyobala in 1938.[208] It is a conduct book written as a series of letters from a mother to her daughter, instructing her how to play the two most important roles in her life, that of a wife and a mother. The author begins her book by saying how the Bengali race has degenerated physically and in courage and moral strength. The blame for this degeneration is laid squarely on inept mothering. Then the author proceeds to advice on how to be a good mother. This also makes it imperative to talk about marriages and wifely duties. Omiyobala is of the opinion that education should be such as to prepare a girl for her familial responsibilities as wife and mother. It is not the purpose of female education to turn out 'manly women' who do not marry and go out to work. She equates feminine men and manly women and feels both are despicable. While not directly advocating child marriages, she is clearly not in favour of late marriages. According to her, early motherhood can be prevented by sending the girl to her husband's home when she is a bit older, as in the north Indian custom of *gaona* (a ceremony that takes place a few years after the wedding when the bride has matured somewhat, as a prelude to sending her to her marital home). The author is of the opinion that the high rate of child mortality is due to poverty and ignorance, and not early motherhood. She refers to a Charuchondro Mitra as saying that statistics show that the rate of child mortality is low in areas where there are greater prevalence of child marriages and *porda*. Since, according to Omiyobala, a woman's ultimate fulfilment lies in her becoming a mother, adopting contraceptives is a way of child murder; she calls it 'legalised infanticide'. She regards the use of contraceptives and abortion as heinous methods that will spell the destruction of the Bengali race.[209] Educated women are not

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[208] Omiyobala, *Ma o Meye* (Salkia, Calcutta: 1938).

[209] In *A New Renaissance and Allied Essays* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications) Private Ltd., 1998), Sibnarayan Ray writes of the interesting difference of opinion between Gandhi and Tagore on the problem of population control. In 1925 Gandhi wrote: 'There can be no two opinions about the necessity of birth control. But the only method handed down from ages past is self-control or *brahmacharya*. It is an infallible sovereign remedy doing good to those who practice it ... Artificial methods are like putting a premium upon vice. They make men and women reckless... if artificial methods become the order of the day nothing but moral degradation can be the result.' Gandhi's views distressed Margaret Sanger, a dedicated advocate of birth control who wrote to Tagore (12 August 1925) asking for his opinion. Tagore was categorical: I am of opinion that Birth Control movement is a great movement not only because it will save women from enforced and undesirable maternity, but

portrayed in a flattering light. They are women who do not marry or if they do they are not good housekeepers, being lazy and fond of reading plays and novels, entrusting the care of the husband and children to paid servants.

This is an interesting book because it is indicative of the way a section of the society thought about women's role in the family and society. Omiyobala says that educated women, working as school inspectors, teachers, doctors and nurses, who forgo matrimony are of no use to society. Their existence or their absence is immaterial to society. What this indicates, as does her apprehension as to how her daughter will react to her advice, is that young women were not following the model she is trying to establish. What is also of interest here is that she advocates Subhadra from the *Mahabharata* as the role model for young women. Subhadra's claim to fame is that she gave birth to a brave son, Abhimanyu. Omiyobala overlooks the fact that Subhadra was also a spirited woman who eloped with Arjuna. In some versions of the *Mahabharata,* Subhadra drove the chariot that they eloped in while Arjuna was fighting those warriors who tried to stop them. This is of course no good role model for young girls from 'respectable' families. Proper Hindu girls certainly should not be encouraged to elope with their lovers and if they did go, it should not seem that they took the initiative in the matter. It is quite probable that the author did not see the ramification of offering Subhadra as a role model but it is interesting to see how the myths have often been used to elucidate to women their feminine roles and how they should be played. The stories of Sati, Savitri, Sita are instrumental in the socialisation of Hindu girls from their infancy.[210] It is also pertinent to note here that in 'feminist' writings, the authors rarely if ever use characters from myths as possible role models.

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because it will help the cause of peace by lessening the number of surplus population of a country scrambling for food and space outside its own rightful limits. In a hunger-stricken country like India it is a cruel crime thoughtlessly to bring more children into existence than could properly be taken care of...' This interesting exchange throws light on the divided response to the issue of contraception.

[210] An example of this use of myths and legends can be seen in this writing by Nagendrabala Dasi (*Nari Dharma*, Calcutta, 1900, Chapter 2, p. 7-19), cited in Judith Walsh, p. 198. Nagendrabala writes: 'Because goddesses such as Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti – jewels in the family of women – were able to become "true wives," they are remembered with reverence even today.'

What is also interesting about this text is that while Omiyobala does not advocate 'masculine' education for girls, when explaining about insemination and childbirth she employs medical terminology that will not be available or comprehensible to a woman who has not had any education in human biology. Then again the advice she imparts regarding child psychology and rearing, nutrition, health care will not be accessible to a woman who has had little or no education. Omiyobala herself acknowledges that two doctors revised the sections on conception and childbirth comprehensively. The sections on child education and psychology might also have been thoroughly edited by Pãchkori Sarkar who introduces the book and who had been initially requested to write this instruction manual for daughters. Sarkar is probably a teacher, as the introduction states his address as Tollygunje School. Whatever be the authorship of these sections, the book has attempted to find credibility with contemporary women by transforming the traditional role of motherhood by presenting it in modern scientific terms with a smattering of information on child psychology and education, health and nutrition and so on. This book is clearly addressing a readership of 'modern' women but it is attempting to re-package and sell them a traditional role model of the ideal woman.

If we examine another text written at about the same time and also published in 1938, it will be possible for us to compare the divergent views regarding the role of women in Bengali society. This is a fictional work called *Golokdhãdha* written by a well-known woman political activist, Santisudha Ghosh.[211] Santisudha herself was a brilliant scholar of mathematics and a respected political figure. The protagonist in her novel Shanta is a young woman growing up with her sister Lolita in her father's younger brother's house after the sudden demise of their father. A student of philosophy, Shanta is a socially aware and restless soul trying to understand the meaning and purpose of life. She is not a strident rebel but she cannot accept what is 'normal' or socially prescribed as the right path to be followed unquestioningly. Shanta comes across as a thoughtful woman but not very focussed. She is

[211] Santisudha Ghosh, *Golokdhãdha* (Calcutta: Gurudas Chattopadhyay & Sons, 1938).

not quite decided as to what she wants to do with life. She tries to deny love but it seems it is not clear as to her why she wants to do that. She resists her family's attempt to get her married as she observes how her spirited sister's life is swamped by her total devotion and obedience to her husband. Shanta also resents her friend Otosi's unquestioning acceptance of all that is imputed about female sexuality. According to Otosi it is natural for women to get married, as they desire sexual gratification and cites Havelock Ellis to make her point. Shanta is furious about the so-called scientific analysis done by men. She feels that while women have always been accused of having an uncontrollable sexual urge, it is the male of every species that has shown a voracious sexual appetite. Shanta is someone who is confused and uncomfortable about her sexuality. This confusion becomes apparent to her as well when she experiences love. She rejects Oporesh's profession of love, showing a distinct distaste for it. But when Sotyokam declares his feeling for her she is overwhelmed by the intensity of her own feelings and forced to acknowledge the physical attraction that Sotyokam holds for her. Shanta's extreme reaction to her own sexuality is not some remnant of Victorian prudishness. She attempts to reject her femininity so that she is not caged in a relationship that negates all her potential as a human being. As she tells Otosi, women like Marie Curie who made a success of their lives have been exceptional women. Most of the wives of accomplished men have sacrificed their potential so that their husbands' brilliance may shine. Shanta refuses to glorify motherhood and sees these attempts at glorification simply as an excuse to cover up what is basically a sexual instinct. She tells her sister Lolita that she has no desire to create life when she does not quite know what Life is all about. She must first grow into human being herself before she can take responsibility for another.

Quite evidently this is a kind of exploration by the author and the protagonist. As I show in my examination of the primary texts, the educated women at this time in Bengal's history were searching for a role model. The older role models were no longer satisfactory and the newer ones were still to evolve. Many women realised that their femininity was a stick that was always used to

beat them with. Reams and reams were written about *stri dhormo*,[212] which seemed to consist chiefly of becoming ideal wives and mothers. It seemed that their greatest contribution to the freedom struggle would be to rear brave sons who would be able to fight bravely against the foreign powers. To many women this was not acceptable. As Shanta says in the novel, if I am able to serve the nation directly why would I want to do it vicariously through my child? (p. 101). This was an argument that women were no longer willing to buy. So the question before them was should they forsake marriage and motherhood if that became an obstacle towards realising their potential? Shanta discovers that the attraction between men and women is natural and the experience of love is intense and beautiful. However much she might want to transform her feelings for Sotyokam into a disembodied affection she does not quite succeed. It would seem that Barin's love for her is the kind of love that she has been trying to achieve but there is a strong feeling that it is an emotion that is very delicately poised and any turbulence may quite upset the balance. There is no resolution at the end as probably no resolution was possible for women of Santisudha's generation. Indeed the title of her work tells it all. *Golokdhãdha* means a labyrinth and Shanta does not know the way out of it. She asks 'What is the way out, O lord? I must have a way. I will go.' (p. 207) Her predicament was shared by all those women who did not see marriage and child bearing as their destiny, who wanted to realise the potential of their life and sought larger goals, who experienced the intensity of heterosexual love but resented the power the institution of marriage gave the

[212] There were texts like Souresh Chandra Choudhury's *Hindu Nari* (Calcutta: Baniniketan, 1938) that was marketed as a gift. The chapter headings of the book indicate the drift of the argument. They are 'Revering the Hindu woman', 'Ideals of the Hindu woman and her education', 'Marriage', 'Duties of the bride', 'Healthcare', 'Child care', 'Children's education', 'Modesty', 'Commitment to the joint family system', 'Soti-Dhormo or dhormo of a pious wife', 'Brotos of Hindu women'. These are followed by the biographical details of fourteen exemplary Hindu women of the like of Soti and Sita. There were numerous other texts as well written by both men and women such as Nandalal Mukhopadhyay's *Swami-Stri* (1933) which contains dialogues on the moral, religious and domestic duties of a Hindu woman, the religious preacher Anukulchandra's *Narir Niti* (1934), laying the rules for women's conduct, Uma Devi's *Balika Jibon* (1930) instructing proper conduct for young Hindu girls, and Banalata Devi's *Lokkhishri* (1935), which was a handbook for housewives containing instructions in the preparation of various dishes and many domestic matters. To make such conduct books interesting they were also written as fiction, which usually pointed out how disastrous it would be if women became 'unwomanly' and did not follow their 'dharma'. Some examples of such writings are Bhupendranath Gangopadhyay's *Obhigyotar Mulyo* (The value of experience), Dijendranath Mitra's *Bujhechho?* (Do you understand) and Kaliprasanna Das's *Ghorer Bou* (Homely wife). All these books were published around 1936.

man, who continually saw around them young bright women surrendering their selves at the halloed portals of wifehood and motherhood. Shanta does not know the way out, she does not know where she wants to go, she suffers acutely but she is resolute that she will not walk down the tried and tested path that is deemed to be the only path that women should walk.

It will be pertinent here to mention two other works, which show the growing consciousness of women with regard to their own selves, and the society where they lived. One book is a collection of brief essays called *Jolpona* (Speculations) by Hemlata Devi,[213] for her 'less educated sisters' who in spite of their deficiency in this matter are interested in matters of the nation, society and family. This book was published in 1935 as was another three-act play called *Praner Porosh* (A touch of life) by Kanaklata Ghosh.[214] *Praner Porosh* is about the indignities that women are faced with in Bengal in the name of marriage. There is a witty song about how so-called respectable gentlemen are willing to sell their sons to the highest bidder, the one who will pay most dowries. Such is the state of affairs that not only must the bride's father give dowry but he also loses his daughter and courts bankruptcy. It is the story of three friends whose lives show the humiliations that a Bengali woman has to face in her marital home. The girls get together to build an ashram that will give shelter and help those women live a life of dignity that have been wronged and abused by society. We must remember that this was a time when the Hindu Code bill had not been passed and women had to suffer polygamy, did not have inheritance rights and could not divorce abusive husbands. Hemlata Devi in her essays addresses many issues that were relevant to both men and women. She says for example, that we must educate women so that they can bring up their children properly, and she also talks of how it is important to educate fathers so that families do not suffer from their ignorance; such men often discipline their wives and daughters and spoil their sons. Similarly on the issue of equal rights for men and women, Hemlata Devi says that perhaps we should be talking about individual rights rather than equal rights. Since there are differences between any two

[213] Hemlata Devi, *Jolpona* (Calcutta: Kedarnath Chattopadhyay, 1935), pp. 6-7, 19, 73-74, 79.
[214] Kanaklata Ghosh, *Praner Porosh* (Calcutta: Gyan Publishing House, 1935).

individuals, it is quite possible that there are differences between men and women. However instead of trying to speculate what these differences may be, let both men and women be given a good education and freedom and see how they flower in their true colours. She urges husbands and fathers to train their wives and daughters in some skill that will be economically useful instead of indulging in the practise of 'dowry'. In this way women will be able to earn and use their money should any calamity befall them. Hemlata Devi recognises the lives of widows as wasted instead of being used for the welfare of society. That would also give them a sense of self-worth.

From our examination of these texts it becomes apparent that while there was a reactionary strand amongst women who found it difficult to accept the modern woman with her college or university education, profession and an apparent lesser commitment to home and family, there was another strand that was engaged in serious rethinking about women's identity, what they were or could be and how they should live their lives to the fullest. I will not make an attempt to place these women as either revolutionaries and rebels, or reformists or feminist or anything else because of the fluidity of their position. What could be said is that in the flux of the time women recognised that there were a lot of possibilities, which could be seized to turn their lives around. The encounter with the West through the process of colonisation made the hitherto homebound Bengali woman realise that there were ways and ways of living and it was possible for them to be different from their mothers and grandmothers. And so we come back to the home and the first stage in the life of a girl, her childhood. What was the Bengali home like at this time in history? How were little girls growing up? What were their grandmothers and mothers teaching them and how did their fathers contribute to their sense of the self?

Childhood: a woman in the making

The life of a little girl in a middle class Bengali family, from the day she was old enough to understand it, hinged around the fact of her getting married.

Sudhir Kakar[215] talks about the childhood being regarded as the 'golden age' in an individual's life history in the Indian culture as contrasted with adulthood in western countries like France and Germany. Kakar further says that, 'such preferential imagery influences a culture's perspective on the different stages of the human life cycle, whether the emphasis is on the child in the adult or on the adult in the child, and on the intensity of individual nostalgia for the "lost paradise" of childhood.' However there was nothing glorious in the childhood of the girl child in any part of India in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. While Kakar talks in a gender-neutral manner, in India how a girl child and boy child experience their childhood is quite different.[216] Girls are quite soon taught the dos and don'ts, the right behaviour, the proprieties that every well-brought up girl should learn and know. While a little boy could be and was likely to be perceived as the incarnation of the mischievous Krishna, it was dinned into the little girl's head from infancy that her girlhood was simply a waiting room stage that would lead her into wifehood and motherhood. It was a time to learn all the good housewife skills and lapses would not be indulged. We can see in the case of Sotyoboti, how girls were constantly reminded that they were to go and serve another family where their childish pranks, ignorance and omissions would not be forgiven.

In Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur* little Chhobi is one of the many girls growing up in her village home. No one in the family is concerned about Chhobi's education and future except her mother Momota. Momota ensures that Chhobi has the opportunity to attend the village *pathshala* and glean from the teachings of the *ponditmoshai* all that she can. Momota is a mother torn between her deep feelings for her daughter and conforming to the harsh behaviour and neglect that the family and society habitually accords to the daughters. She disciplines the spirited and rebellious Chhobi in front of the

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[215] Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World* (Delhi: OUP, 1978), p.9.

[216] Sudhir Kakar, pp. 79-83. Kakar says, 'A young child's wishes are fully gratified and his unfolding capacities and activities accepted, if not always with manifest delight, at least with affectionate tolerance.' This observance is certainly gender specific, pertaining to the male child only in most cases. As Kakar notes further on, an idealised image of the 'good mother' is largely a male construction and it is not difficult to see why. He says, 'Women do not disembody their mothers in this way. For daughters, the mother is not an adoring figure on a pedestal: she is more earthy presence, not always benign but always *there*.' Evidently a girl child usually experiences her mother differently from a male sibling.

family members. In private, when there is no one around, she showers on her daughter the overwhelming love that she cannot express in public:

> Mamata struck Chhobi's back hard with the ladle a couple of times and said in a tense but low voice, 'You good-for-nothing girl! Why do I have to listen to criticism from other people on your account all the time? I can't take it anymore.' Her anger flared up even more as her eyes fell on Kulada. 'Why put your cane down? Give her a thrashing. It'll please all those people, and me too!' Her voice choked, her eyes brimmed with tears. She dragged Chhobi across the courtyard to the other side of the house, muttering all the while to herself, 'It's not as if I have dozens of daughters. Only this one, yet I can't feed her properly, nor give her decent clothes. I'm supposed to be a zamindar's daughter-in-law. My only fault is I don't lock her up in the house and teach her things way beyond her age! All right, so be it. From today I won't let her out! ... to be beaten up suddenly by her mother of all people seemed the most grievous hurt of all. A deep, unspoken sorrow welled up and burst out at last. She began to weep. Mamata looked at her for a moment, then pulled Chhobi to her, her own eyes filling with tears. 'Poor dear, did I hurt you badly? Let me see. Why do you make me lose my temper so? All the other girls stay at home and help with the housework, and you run around all day; of course people will talk.' (pp. 21-22)

She keeps aside Chhobi's lunch carefully so that when she returns for lunch in the afternoon Momota can feed her well. Her mother's love and implicit support is very important to the making of Chhobi's identity. Chhobi is the dream Momota could not dream for herself. Chhobi recognises the subterranean love that is there in her mother even when Momota spanks her. Her growing up and wanting to venture into the unknown world stems from the power of her mother's love. Chhobi bears in her the anger and frustration of her mother and aunts and grandmother. Her rage and rebellion is also theirs, which they had been powerless to express. However Chhobi is not bitter like her young cousin Sephu. Sephu seems to have become old beyond her years as she does housework and looks after her young siblings. Neglected as a girl and continually engaged in the household chores, Sephu does not even remotely experience the bliss of childhood that her brothers and cousins were enjoying:

> Sephu, only a year younger than Chhobi, had become so strange. A tired and dejected shadow had already settled over her eyes, she looked so sad. ... She spent her days with a sour look on her face, scolding and beating her brothers and sisters, serving them meals. She ran errands for her

> grandmother, washed clothes and the baby's sheets and at times quarrelled with her mother, 'I won't do it – I can't do all this work.'
> Her grandmother's response then would be, 'Ha, such rage in a girl! Won't do housework? What are you to do then, tell me?' (pp. 162-163)

Where Chhobi is the wild rebellious child, Sephu exhibits the tameness of the defeated, lashing out intermittently and ineffectually. Sephu's gaze does not have the sparkle of possibilities as she recognises the script that her life will follow. Her mother Soroswoti has nothing to offer Sephu, burdened as she is with continuous child bearing and her responsibilities as one of the daughters-in-law. However when another girl is born to Soroswoti, she tells Chhobi that she wishes her daughter to be as spirited and brave as Chhobi is. Her aunt's sentiments surprise and overwhelm Chhobi. It is as if, worn down with her own life, Soroswoti is at last willing her last-born daughter to counter all the insults and difficulties thrown at her. All her life she has been a picture of conformity to the traditional ideals of womanhood and in reward she has been crushed and humiliated. Soroswoti now starts to look at alternatives to the traditional lives of women like her for her new-born daughter. Within herself Chhobi holds the promise of that alternative – a different life. When Chhobi refuses to get married, her mother and aunt do not understand what she wants but they want her to succeed in whatever she wants to do. Little Chhobi on her part feels rather than understands the deprivations that characterise a woman's life. She protests when her grandmother gives extra helpings to her brother and male cousins and not to her. She hears at night the cry of Uncle Onil's wife when he beats her. She witnesses the wedding of her youngest aunt Binti to a widower twice her age. She sees another aunt Lotu who has been sent back to her parents by her in-laws. She sees the girls in the *pathsala* spending their days without any focus or purpose as they bide the time before their parents manage to marry them off. When she comes back to the village after spending a few years in the city attending school, she sees her friends as overworked and malnourished mothers of children. Her greatest shock is when she comes across the widowed Durga with her great urge to live.

Bonya in Sabitri Ray's *Meghna Podma* is another restless spirited girl who comes to live in her ancestors' village with her parents and siblings. But Bonya's life is different from Chhobi's because she is an unloved child. Like any other child she craves the love of her mother that is only reserved for her brothers Kripan, Kishan and Tuphan. The little Bonya feels palpably the hatred that her mother Torulota has for her as a daughter:

> The brothers and sister are forbidden by their father to stay out after dark. Hence Ma will definitely tell Baba about her returning home so late. Bonya has noticed that her mother enjoys embarrassing her before her father.
> Torulota burns with anger on seeing her daughter stand still in the courtyard in the dark. 'Where were you?'
> 'On the wooden bridge.'
> 'Wooden bridge!' Torulota gives a distorted scream. The boys have also come home. And this hag of a girl must stay out even after nightfall.
> 'Weren't you supposed to light the evening lamp before the deity? From tomorrow onwards you will not go out to the fields.'
> There couldn't be a greater punishment for Bonya. Her thunderstruck appearance made Torulota even more furious.
> 'Now why are standing there that way? Wash your hands and feet and get down to your studies.'
> Torulota was not terribly worried about her daughter's education. In a short while she would be married off and sent to her in-laws place. Even if you taught girls it would not serve any purpose in their future. (p. 78)

In another section we read:

> In all of her ten years of existence, Bonya has realised that her mother doesn't like her at all. As is she is disliked simply because she is a girl.
> Tuphan, Kishan and Bonya sit side by side to eat. But she feels that it is in feeding her brothers that her mother's face glows with happiness. She does not witness that glow in her mother's face when she serves her. Yet Bonya is satiated by the food that quenches her hunger. (p. 95)

Bonya's affectionate father is too busy with his duties as a schoolteacher and his passion for theatre to notice his little girl is deprived of love. She seems to be growing up in the interstices of everyone's cares and concerns. She tries to find love in her siblings and cousin Uma, in the colours of nature, which she also discovers in the pigment that the potters use. No one is bothered about her education or visualises a future for her. So she creates her own world in her paintings. She withdraws from the world of the here-and-now where she is

humiliated and chastised to create another of the imagination and vivid colours. It is noteworthy that she does not replicate the real world in doll play but she creates something new. It is a tribute to the resilience of her spirit that no matter how much neglect she suffers, she does not grow bitter and disillusioned. Instead she finds ways to keep her own little world vibrating with the promise of life. She is a lonely child in a household full of people but she is not sad and dejected. She thirsts for life despite her mother's rejection of her and finds companionship and happiness in the beauty of the natural world of rural Bengal. Bonya is expected to follow in the footsteps of cousin Uma who grows up to be a girl who has the makings of an ideal wife and mother. In Uma we see how the socialisation of a girl in middle class Bengali household takes place. She comes to the household as an orphan and quickly integrates herself with the others. She is soft-spoken and graceful. She assists her aunts in cooking and other household activities and takes care of the young ones. Uma reads the revolutionary literature Kripan brings home and helps to conceal the weapon he gives her. And then her wedding is finalised and Uma is married off. She proves herself to be a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law. The spark of daring that she had shown in hiding arms and proscribed literature for Kripan and covering his revolutionary activities from the elders of the house is smothered in domesticity in her married life. Uma does not voice her thoughts or desires and Bonya wonders if Uma had other dreams. She feels that Uma and Kripan shared something special and that there was a latent fire in Uma, but Bonya can never know for sure what Uma's feelings were as Uma almost effortlessly adapts to her new role. Bonya knows the life Uma lives is not for her. She has to strive to carve out a different sort of life for herself.

Deboki in *Paka Dhaner Gan* is again a deprived and unwanted child. Her mother is not happy with her daughters as getting them married is a huge burden in the impoverished household. Dinonath is a respectable gentleman being the headmaster of the village school but his meagre salary is not sufficient for his large family. Deboki spends her day helping the mother in her household chores and looking after her young siblings. Even then her mother Subola shouts at her for her ineptness and unfeminine ways. When she tears

her mother's old wedding sari, Subola says angrily, 'Such a big girl and still no sense. You are only good at gulping down pots and pots of rice. I really don't know what will happen to you once you get married.' (p. 30). The possibility for change in her life occurs with the sudden arrival of Partho, a revolutionary and her father's student. He convinces her father to send her to a girls' school in a nearby village. The two sisters Deboki and Ketoki go and while Ketoki stays in the school boarding, an elderly relation puts up Deboki. Deboki has no role model to follow but Partho inspires her to dream of a life beyond marriage and child bearing. She is shocked when her father comes to take her away as her wedding had been arranged. In her desperation she asks Partho to convince her father to call off the wedding or marry her himself so as to escape the life that she loathes. She is a very young girl when her wedding is arranged but Deboki is aware what wedding entails. She knows that it will be another version of cooking, bearing and rearing children, poverty and helplessness. Her difficult circumstance notwithstanding Deboki had woven some dreams and one can imagine it is the vision of a future that places her on an equal footing with Partho, who is the 'glorious outsider' doing wonderful brave things. Partho also spells possibilities through his own life. He belonged to an ordinary farming family from a neighbouring village and then went on to achieve a hero status through his courage and selflessness as a revolutionary. If a boy from such a humble background could extend the boundaries of his existence and create his destiny, then a girl like Deboki could hope to do the same. Like Chhobi and Bonya, Deboki is also irrepressible, even when she is dealt a cruel blow.

Subornolota, Sotyoboti's daughter in Ashapurna Devi's trilogy *Prothom Protishruti, Subornolota* and *Bokulkotha* is a desired and loved daughter. Sotyoboti was an exceptional woman who always fought against the wrongs of society and its hypocrisies. She was not afraid to point out the flaws of her elders when she saw them. Being the daughter of such a mother who was acutely conscious of the injustices heaped on women by men and society, Subornolota had a privileged childhood that Sotyoboti herself did not have. Subornolota went to school while Sotyoboti had to work hard to get herself educated as no one else in the family cared to think about the education of a

girl child. Sotyoboti had been married young and she had vowed that her daughter's life would not be spoiled as hers had been. But Subornolota did not understand her mother's zeal and drive, which she found hard to cope with. So she insisted on going with her father to visit her grandmother in the village. There, without her mother's knowledge she was married off. All her life Subornolota is unable to adjust and mould herself to the role of a mute doormat, a provider of sex and a bearer of children as was expected of her. She longs for the world outside and for knowledge and beauty.

In the case of Sotyoboti there are persistent efforts on part of the large family and specially the women of the family, mother, grandmother and aunts, to socialise her so that she becomes a demure, obedient wife. But she is too spirited to accept the socialisation without any resistance and her natal family fail to break her spirit. Even in her marital home, where she is sent when still a child, she refuses to break down and conform to what is expected of a wife and daughter-in-law. Subornolota, being Sotyoboti's daughter was not taught the art of being an ideal wife and mother. Sotyoboti tried to educate her into being a self-respecting upright individual and not a weak and pliant *meyemanush*. Subornolota's spirit, that she might well have inherited from her mother, and her education does exactly what society was apprehensive it would do – she falls terribly short of the ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. Paradoxically, even her frustrated mother-in-law acknowledges that for all her faults she is an admirable human being with a generous heart. Subornolota continually proves herself to be Sotyoboti's daughter by protesting against all that is wrong and unjust and she tries to make upright, generous and courageous human beings of all the boys and girls in the family by educating them. Of course she fails. The boys, even her own sons become men in the mould of their fathers and the girls take to the mould of their aunts and grandmother, except Subornolota's two youngest daughters, Parul and Bokul. Subornolota's story is perhaps the best and most explicit example of how a woman is made, as Simone de Beauvoir says. Her childhood is about her making and also her unmaking. She remains a misfit all her life, unable to be the wife and mother that was expected of her, with her husband and her children all feeling that she had failed them. She feels she has failed herself

and her mother, unable to carve out a life of dignity for herself and her daughters and unable to teach her sons to be human beings rather than men.

As for Subornolota's two youngest daughters, Parul and Bokul, they are exposed to both their mother's strivings and frustration and the 'feminine' model recommended by the rest of the family. Their two elder sisters had rejected their mother's influence and grown up like girls in that family were supposed to grow up. For Chãpa and Chondon, their mother's education had not been easy to follow and the influence of their grandmother and the entire household had been too powerful for Subornolota to counter. They grow up in a household where their mother is regarded as insane. Consequently it is easy to disregard her teachings and values. They are absorbed within the pettiness of the circumscribed women's world of domesticity, marriage and child bearing. They are married off early and raise a brood of children. When they come back to their natal home it is their grandmother they come back to and not their mother. For Parul and Bokul, following Subornolota's dream is no easy thing. As Subornolota grows harsher trying to battle the narrow, patriarchal values of her marital family, her daughters fear her hard, warrior-like mode and move away from her. However at this time their part of the family moves away from the old ancestral home and Parul and Bokul find the chance to grow up away from the claustrophobic joint family set-up in the relative freedom of their father's home. The cynicism of their father and brothers notwithstanding both Parul and Bokul are able to educate themselves. Their formal education is not allowed to progress smoothly but no one is able to stop them from reading which opens out the outside world to them, the realm of knowledge, and enables them to create a parallel world through their creativity. They do not grow closer to their mother but they are able to appreciate to an extent Subornolota's desperate striving to live a humane, decent, dignified life and her yearning for a breath of fresh air. They react variously to the constant humiliations that Subornolota experiences. Parul grows to be an intelligent, insightful but detached woman. She develops a core that is inaccessible and therefore cannot be humiliated and hurt. Bokul is hesitant and shy, almost apologetic of her own existence. She is weary from the battle that she has seen her mother constantly wage against the

family and society. Bokul does not have the stomach for such a battle. In a sense Bokul learns that confronting the family and society will not help her achieve her desired goals. She learns to be unobtrusive and work her way quietly through. She does not get to marry the man she loves but she manages to carve out a life of dignity and respect that Subornolota would have approved of.

Far from being a carefree, idyllic world, the authors depict the childhood of their female protagonists as sites of ruthless socialisation that aims to create docile and conformist individuals who do not believe in themselves and their ability to counter what is apportioned to them. The protagonists are exceptional in that to a large extent they are able to counter their making or as we may feel, their unmaking. Sotyoboti, Subornolota and Chhobi are not only strong spirited girls, they have sharp, enquiring minds. They ask questions continually, refusing to accept anything without being given the proof of its veracity or honest explanation. Their innocence, their craving for affection and nourishment is continually battered against neglect, indifference, hatred and the harsh reality of women's lives. In their childlike way, some of these characters instinctively realise that they need to create a more humane, sympathetic, joyful and beautiful world. So Parul writes poetry while her sister writes fiction and Bonya paints while Chhobi goes out to serve those more desperate and helpless than her.

Becoming the wife and mother

In *Nobankur* Chhobi perceives her young cousin Shephu going through the motions of becoming a competent housewife while she has some leeway due to her mother Momota's indulgence. Momota herself had been brought up in the town in her brother's household as her parents had died when she was young. She had some education and she was taught to sing as well as to play the sitar. A shy young girl she was soon told in her marital household that women in respectable families did not sing or play musical instruments. That was enough to silence her and she never opened the harmonium box, and the sitar fell apart due to neglect and disuse. Momota adapted herself to the customs of the house she had been married into without any protest and it is

only her sister-in-law Sukumari who remembers the talented shy young girl who had entered the house as her elder brother's wife many years ago. Momota moulded herself into the wife and daughter-in-law that the family expected, spending her days in cooking and other housework, quietly giving up a way of life that she had till her wedding day. However Momota keeps alive her dreams that she had as a young girl and tries to fulfil them in her daughter:

> She held Chhobi's chin, and with a curious mixture of joy and sorrow on her own face, she whispered, 'You are my dream Chhobu...' She pressed Chhobi's unwashed face to her breast. (p. 46)

Momota is exceptional in that though she is aware of the 'right' way of bringing up daughters, she fails to do so. Chhobi's insubordination and wildness is blamed on her lack of discipline. We are not privy to the interaction between Momota and her husband Kuloda but from Kuloda's actions regarding his business and his arrangements for Chhobi's wedding it is evident that Momota is not consulted about matters of finance or her daughter. She is expected to comply and carry out his decisions. As for her younger sister-in-law, Kuloda's brother Sukhoda's wife Soroswoti, she is also the dutiful and obedient wife and daughter-in-law. Sukhoda is shown to be a more liberal man than his brother or father, being a schoolteacher. Yet he does not seem to spare much thought for his wife as seen in her frequent pregnancies. Soroswoti is worn out with continual child bearing and is abused by her mother-in-law for her brood of children. It is somehow her fault that she has so many children. Soroswoti's humiliation finds expression in tears. Her humiliation also contains the seed of a rebellion that she wishes to sow in her newborn daughter. It reveals itself when she tells Chhobi that she wishes her newborn daughter to be as feisty as Chhobi is. Both the mothers Momota and Soroswoti weave into their daughter's lives other dreams than those of tame wifehood.

There is also the older wife in *Nobankur*, the grandmother Purnoshoshi. In the *ondormohol* it is her dictate that runs. Yet at one crucial moment we learn how much of an authority she really wields. In the wake of the famine there is a

discussion between Kuloda and his father on financial matters and Purnoshoshi tries to intervene. Her husband turns to her angrily and asks her to shut up. Purnoshoshi learns that even in her old age she still hadn't earned the right to voice her opinions. They were superfluous, unnecessary, uncalled for. Her years of loyalty and unquestioning obedience to the patriarch did not make her a matriarch though it was she who fashioned girls into ideal wives and daughters. As she says,

> 'I am nothing more than a slave in this house. I came here at the age of nine. I am sixty-four now and I still don't have the right to speak.' (p. 170)

It is significant that when Chhobi is about to leave for Calcutta to attend college, Purnoshoshi, a mellowed widow, gifts Chhobi gold bangles that were intended to be a wedding gift, to help her finance her studies. The same Purnoshoshi who had remarked that a woman's destiny consists of looking after the house and children when Momota had exhorted *Ponditmoshai* to teach Chhobi, assists Chhobi in the only way she can to continue her studies. It is not only that Purnoshoshi has become gentler after being widowed but also that the times are changing fast and the world that she grew up in as a girl and a wife has changed. The family itself had undergone a transformation with the loss of their feudal holdings and beginning again as traders. Purnoshoshi also changes during the time of the novel from being a steadfast custodian of patriarchal values to reassessing her position as a woman. She welcomes the birth of Sukhoda and Soroswoti's daughter and helps Chhobi's further studies. There is no knowing what the newborn's future will be but it can be reasonably be expected that under the stewardship of a changed Purnoshoshi she will find the *ondormohol* to be a more sustaining and nurturing space.

Then there is Sukumari, Chhobi's aunt, Kuloda's sister. Sukumari is married to a wealthy man but is unhappy because she is childless and her husband is in love with another woman. Sukumari cannot accept her husband's liaison with another woman though at this time it was legal for a Hindu male to marry more than once. As we see in *Prothom Protishruti* little girls were taught a

broto (ritual) called sẽ*juti* which was observed so that they might be spared co-wives. It was a frequent occurrence in Bengali households particularly within the *Kulin* subgroup in both the Brahmin and Kayastha caste. Girls and their families were often threatened with remarriage of the groom as a punishment for non-compliance and/or insubordination. We see in the case Sotyoboti how her in-laws try to manipulate her father into sending her to them before the agreed time by suggesting they might marry off their son again. Despite her husband's infidelity Sukumari cannot return to her parents' house and there was no provision for divorce in a Hindu marriage at this time. She realises that she has no way out of the morass that she is trapped in. So she decides to reach out to another girl, Chhobi, with the resources that she had to enable her to make something of her life. Daughters in this novel are precious to mothers like Momota. They offer the mothers a chance to relive their lives and work towards a different outcome. By making Chhobi her surrogate daughter, Sukumari too wants to live her life again, in a different way. Chhobi is her consolation amidst her loneliness and her hope for a better future. Chhobi is also the closest friend that she has, when her natal family has turned distant and strange and her husband has also moved away.

Yet marital relationships were also undergoing subtle changes. If we move from *Nobankur* to a novel like *Sworolipi* or *Paka Dhaner Gan*, we perceive how the marital relationships were gradually changing. Women who were educated, in some instances working or were politically active began to see their roles as wives as something more than carrying out their husband's wishes and bearing and rearing children. In *Paka Dhaner Gan* Lota and Sulokkhon have a more equal relation than Momota, Soroswoti or Sukumari might have had with their husbands. Lota is not a workingwoman but she is politically conscious and is intellectually and emotionally involved in her husband's political activities. In her own way she tries to be more than Sulokkhon's wife by trying to educate the women and the girls in the village and encouraging them to learn skills that will help them financially. The change in relationship is also possible because Sulokkhon and Lota married for love. So it is both love and mutual respect that helps to transform their relationship. Sulokkhon thinks nothing of helping Lota sometimes to cope with

her household work. One afternoon Lota and Sulokkhon were talking as Sulokkhon was about to leave for his political work when Lota suddenly notices the gathering of the dark rain bearing clouds. She rushes out to collect the rice grains spread out to dry in the courtyard. Sulokkhon quickly joins her and they work together. While she collects the grains he takes the filled containers to the storeroom (p. 251). Similarly another day Sulokkhon comes back home to find that Lota has not had dinner despite his telling her that he will be late. He is annoyed as Partho is with him and they have already eaten. Partho asks Lota to go and eat and Lota says that it is better to go to bed hungry than make a trek to the kitchen in the darkness with the owls all around. So Sulokkhon accompanies her and when she goes to the pond to wash the dishes, Sulokkhon follows her with the oil lamp (pp. 252-253).While Lota may be an outsider in the activities of the party, Sulokkhon tries to be Lota's equal partner in their domestic responsibilities. Similarly the relationship of Kunal and Deboki who gradually fall in love with each other, as do Partho and Bhodra, is quite refreshing in the comradeship that they exhibit. Deboki and Kunal meet each other as equals, one working as a nurse at a tuberculosis hospital and while the other is a press photographer visiting his ailing sister. Deboki experiences acute poverty trying to support her large family of father and siblings but Kunal respects her independence and is sensitive enough not to humiliate her by offering her money. At times of crisis, like when the roof of her hut is leaking, she can of course ask for loans. The nature of their relationship is best illustrated by their seeking each other out for emotional support in times of crisis. When Deboki learns of Ketoki's marriage to the already married Dulal, the first person she seeks out is Kunal even though she realises there is nothing Kunal can do. Deboki also knows of Kunal's pain that stems from the death of his sister from tuberculosis in the hospital where Deboki works. Partho and Bhodra's relationship is quite unusual because Bhodra is a widow from a feudal family while Partho comes from a low caste peasant background. In their relationship they break through the insurmountable class-caste barrier as also the taboos that govern a widow's life. It is a difficult relationship that turns the hierarchical structures of middle class Hindu society on its head with Bhodra and Partho first meeting each other as landlady and tenant. Gradually their common sympathy for the

workers and peasants is revealed and their relationship is transformed into that of comrades. Meghi and Ali also illustrate the changing nature of the marital relationships. Meghi was a Brahmin's widow and Ali falls in love with her. When this is revealed in the village her head is shaved off and she is paraded in the village to broadcast her 'shameful act'. With Partho's aid, Meghi is released from the hold of her tormentors and Ali and Meghi leave the village to get married and start a new life (pp. 120-121). When Deboki meets Meghi later in Calcutta she is working as a nurse at the tuberculosis hospital and Ali is working as a compositor in a press. This was a radical relationship made outside the boundaries of caste and religion where the couple had to rely solely on each other, their determination and skills and cooperation of their well-wishers, in the absence of material resources. This is as good an indicator as any of the fluidity that characterised the late colonial period where such a relationship can be forged and preserved against all odds.

Nirad C Chaudhuri talks in his book *Bangali Jibone Romoni*[217] about a few men marrying for love but in most of these cases, as he has been candid enough to acknowledge, it was the case of men becoming attracted to girls/women and then proposing to marry them, often in the face of parental opposition. However, as we see in Sabitri Ray's writings, a greater laxity with respect to women's mobility, their education and emergence in the public workplace meant that the interaction between men and women was facilitated and it became possible for both men and women to acknowledge their affection for each other. Marriages still took place largely through negotiations conducted by families and friends or the professional matchmakers called *ghotok*[218] but there were some cases when men and women interacted and decided to get married. For example if we take a look at the Choudhury household in Ray's novel *Meghna Podma*, there is a great deal of difference in the marital relationship of the parental generation and that of the children. The elder Choudhury Nilkontho, the dissolute head of the family married his wife but sought sexual satisfaction elsewhere. She was a simple and religious

[217] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Bangali Jibone Romoni: Abirbhab* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 1999).
[218] Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.46-47.

woman who worshipped her husband, stayed within the *ondormohol* bringing up her son and administering to the needs of the family. Her sister-in-law, Nilkontho's brother Nilkanto's wife does not have to contend with a husband's infidelity. She is the real carer of the family as all the household tasks are done under her instruction and supervision. Yet it is a strictly hierarchical set-up that runs according to the desires of the *korta* (patriarch or head of the household) and family tradition. In the case of Nilkontho's son Obhijit, his relationship with his wife the orphaned Uma involves love and respect for each other. It is in Uma's relationship with her husband that we see the change that was coming about even in rural Bengal with educated young men like Obhijit trying to establish a companionate relationship with their wives. The situation changes even more with Nilkanto's son Meghjit who marries Uttora for love without informing his family and brings her home. Meghjit is an artist who has been trained in Europe and Uttora was a revolutionary. The family comes to accept the couple and their different relaxed and informal relationship. In a household where women would see their husbands away from all eyes in the dead of the night, if they were lucky, Meghjit takes Uttora out for walks in the village and its surroundings. Apart from doing away with the notions of *porda,* this indicated an intimacy between the couple that was rare if not unheard of, as was exhibiting this intimacy in public.

Yet we must remember that this change was uneven. Marital relations changed in some sections but in many ways they remained the same. For example Parul in *Subornolota* is married off to an educated, well-established man. It would be expected that her marital relationship with her husband would be different from that of her mother's. But we see the same power dynamics at work. Her husband wants to control her entire existence. Perhaps he is more sophisticated than Subornolota's husband, a more caring and gentle person but he is similar in wanting to be the be-all and end-all of her life. All his life he continued to feel that he did not have total control over her mind and soul. Her writings made him jealous as they indicated a realm of living where he could not enter. Parul stops writing poetry that had the slightest whiff of romance about it as her husband felt it was inconceivable that a woman could write such poetry unless she was actually in love with

someone, who was obviously not her husband. Parul is a fairly efficient housewife but it is always apparent that it is a role-playing for her and while she never rebels violently and openly like her mother Subornolota, she makes it evident that the 'role' is not 'her'. Her husband cannot fault her for being actually unfaithful or for dereliction of duty, which frustrates him. What frustrates him even more is that he cannot pin down and grasp the person of Parul, which seems inviolable and beyond his reach. Parul is a strange amalgam of a rebel and a conformist of social prescriptions. She never goes out of her way to challenge patriarchal society as her mother might have done in her ineffectual way, yet she does not become a bearer of patriarchal values like her elder sisters. She is not terribly particular about following a widow's rituals after the death of her husband and neither does she go to live with her sons, choosing to live alone by the banks of the Ganges, away from family and friends. Even though living in a society that set great store by women's sexual purity, Parul is not particularly taken aback when her niece Shompa arrives to take shelter with her lover for a few days.

In Parul and Bokul's *baper-bari* (father's house) it is Shompa who causes a revolution of sorts by leaving the house to go away with her lover, a man who is lower than her in the social hierarchy. Sotyoban is a worker in an industry while Shompa comes from a well-to-do middle class family. What is even more startling is that Bokul, the shy and nervous girl of yore, who is Shompa's aunt, is her mentor. While Shompa is able to stand up for her love for Sotyoban, a timid Bokul failed to get the nervous Nirmol to seek his family's permission to marry Bokul.. Bokul even attends Nirmol's wedding to Madhuri. After the death of Subornolota, the family does not seem terribly interested in marrying her, particularly her father, as he wants her around to care for him. Bokul looks after him and starts writing on the quiet and gradually attains fame and respect as an author. When her father passes away it is revealed that she has inherited a room on the topmost floor of her father's house. While her brothers are not quite happy about it, no one can deny her as she is an unmarried daughter. Bokul is in the family yet out of it. She is not a wife or mother, she ceases to be a daughter with her father's death and she is not quite the sister as she becomes Onamika Devi, the writer. With her

assumption of a different persona, Bokul plays with her identities and subtly subverts the patriarchal politics of identity that crushed her mother Subornolota, who so wanted to live as a human being. Her *nom de plume* Onamika means 'one without a name'. It is possible to surmise that this is the shy Bokul's quest for anonymity, as well as her refusal to be called a name, to be labelled and to be pinned down to a familial relationship. The two familial relationships that hold any significance for Bokul are those that she has with her niece Shompa and with sister Parul. The 'very dissimilar' Shompa becomes her spiritual daughter, nonchalantly subversive and rebellious. Shompa is the girl that Bokul could never become, sensitive, shy and scared as she was. Shompa's parents hold Bokul responsible for all of Shompa's 'misdeeds'. To Bokul, Shompa might be the end product of the entire struggle that has been waged by her mother and grandmother as she calmly goes about fashioning her life as she wants to, without fear or apology. It is not a heroic or extraordinary life that Shompa has chosen for herself, but it is important that she has been able to make choices without guilt or fear, to live and work, and spend the rest of her life with a man she loves. It is a life that was not available to Sotyoboti, Subornolota or Subornolota's daughters.

This is a new dimension to the traditional marital relationship. Not only does Shompa marry for love but she also marries a man who is socially inferior to her. Soon afterwards Sotyoban meets with an accident that causes him to lose his legs. It is Shompa who finds work and a place to stay, while caring for the invalid Sotyoban. Like her grandmother she desires a house with a veranda from where she can look out on the world. Subornolota was denied it but Shompa manages to make for herself a house with a south-facing veranda. Ashapurna conveys the love and respect this strangely matched couple have for each other.

Perhaps, amidst this uneven picture of the marital roles that women were playing, we could say that one of the factors for the changing dynamics in the marital relationships is that women had more time to form their individuality as they were married off later, with many parents ensuring their education continued till they married. Their formative years were being spent differently

from their mothers and grandmothers. Instead of learning the ways of running a family they were reading and interacting with the public realm of social and political activism. So even in those cases where they did not have access to economic resources they were able to interact with their husbands at the level of ideas. Hence, though the power dynamics remained essentially the same, for young women their status within the family changed for the better. In many cases since the disparity in the ages of the bride and groom were reduced, grooms did not seem to be the frightening paternal figure that they would to a girl of 7 or 8. Though as the relationship of Subornolota and Probodh, where there was a difference of only eight years between them, illustrates, the reduced seniority did not prevent husbands from exercising their authority over their wives.

Another aspect of the Bengali family that we notice is the emergence of smaller families. While the state promoted two children norm came later, the movement away from the agricultural economy by the educated Bengali *Babu* working and living in the cities in smaller houses with a higher standard of living meant that couples found it prudent to adopt contraceptive methods to keep their families smaller. Motherhood was still glorified and it was important to bear sons who would continue the family name and perform the last rites of the parents but it was no longer necessary to have a large number of 'hands' to assist the patriarch in economic activities. For women like Soroswoti, Chhobi's aunt in *Nobankur,* who were worn out with child bearing, the ability to plan smaller families was like manna from heaven. It certainly went a long way to improve their quality of life. The emphasis in the early twentieth century had shifted from 'may you be the mother of a hundred sons' to being the mother of brave sons. This is of course not to suggest that all women in Bengal experienced a qualitative change in their life with their reproductive role being perceived differently. *Subornolota* provides ample evidence that it took a long time even for middle class families to accept smaller families as the norm. Husbands claimed their conjugal rights and women could not deny them. The spirited Subornolota tries to resist the advances of her husband without much success. He, at one point manages to dupe Subornolota into thinking that if she takes the medicine that he had brought her, she would not

conceive. Sometime later when she realises that she is pregnant, she is devastated as she had believed his bluff. We must remember that the concept of marital rape did not exist and it was the duty of the wife to give in to the sexual demands of the husband. Yet within the space of a few years we had women like Renuka Ray, who became a minister in the same government where her husband was a senior civil servant. Of course Renuka came from a progressive family with Mrs. Sarala Ray, the founder of the Gokhale Memorial School, for her grandmother and had a degree in Economics from the London School of Economics.[219] But there were others like Manikuntala Sen who came from a very ordinary family in Barisal and went on to become a respected leader in the undivided communist party. She married a co-worker from the party who belonged to another community. She continued to be an active party member even after marrying, eventually retiring from politics a few years later due to ideological differences.[220]

For Bengali women as indeed Indian women generally, motherhood was the highest state of being and was considered to be a woman's best achievement. However this comes with a caveat. She had to be the mother of sons. If a newly wed bride struggled to establish her position in the marital family, the struggle became easy once she had borne a male heir. Her position worsened however, if she gave birth to a girl. The midwives who came to help during childbirth charged less if a girl was born.[221] Lactating mothers were pampered with a nutritious diet if the newly born was a male child or left pretty much to her own devices if it was a daughter. *Nobankur* gives an example of how the birth of a baby girl may be received:

> After a very difficult labour Soroswoti gave birth to a baby girl. Purnoshoshi gave Dokshina the news, 'You have another granddaughter – Sukhoda's daughter.'

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[219] Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1982).
[220] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Calcutta: Stree, 2001).
[221] Dhanvanti Rama Rau, *An Inheritance* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1977), cited in Ranjana Harish, *Indian Women's Autobiographies.* Dhanvanti was born in Hubli, Karnataka and went on to become a lecturer in English and President of the All India Women's Conference. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan (1959) and, Albert and Mary Lasker Award and Watumal Foundation Distinguished Services Award for her work in the area of planned parenthood. When she was born the midwife charged a reduced fee of three rupees instead of the five rupees demanded when a son was born.

> 'Girl?' His face twisted in a grimace and he closed his eyes again. Then he slowly said, 'Kill her! Don't let her grow – do you hear me!'
> Purnoshoshi flared up, 'What a thing to say! Why should we kill her? Poor darling!' (p. 233)

The difference in what is considered to be the glorious stage in the lives of men and women can be understood from the mythical stories of young Krishna. In songs and folklore the Krishna who is celebrated is the mischievous young boy who goes around stealing butter and breaking the water laden earthen vessels of the village women and entrancing everyone with his songs. While the carefree and innocent childhood of the god is happily recounted there is no parallel in the case of young girls. For women in Bengal, the image they can identify with is that of Durga, the benevolent mother goddess who is also *Shakti.* What is interesting in the context of Bengal is that though the highlight of the Durga story is her being empowered by all the gods as only she can slay the demon, the festival of Durga *Pujo* is about the married daughter coming home to her parents with her children from Mount Koilash. The image of the powerful warrior goddess is sublimated to yield place to the benign image of the daughter who longs to visit her parents. It is an image that can be easily identified with and socially accommodated without inspiring any subversive, or worse, rebellious models for Bengali girls. While there are many powerful goddesses of various origins in the pantheon, none equal the significance of Durga, not even the violent Kali who has been frequently propitiated because of her destructive powers. What is being foregrounded here is the nurturing, all-protective mother who gives birth to gifted children. Of course the myths do not always run parallel to life situations as Durga has two powerful daughters in Lokkhi and Soroswoti, the goddesses of wealth and learning respectively. Bengali women quite frequently had no recourse to wealth and were denied learning. In the twentieth century, however, women's literacy improved slowly and, legal reforms and access to the public workplace allowed women some access to financial resources.

As we have seen earlier, while motherhood was glorified, women had complex feelings about motherhood. Momota is often quite hard on Chhobi

and thrashes her when she is stubborn and rebellious, but then she lovingly feeds her when she comes back from school for lunch and makes it possible for Chhobi to have an education. Her affection for her son is uncomplicated while her feelings about Chhobi are quite complex. She wishes Chhobi would be like other girls but is quite happy that Chhobi shows a spirit that might make it possible for her to live out Momota's dreams. She cannot understand what Chhobi wants and is scared for her, yet she assists Chhobi to fulfil her desires. Subornolota has many children but her motherhood does not lead her to feel ecstatic. She wants to do what is right for her children and bring them up to be generous, liberal humane beings but her emotional attachment to her children is ambiguous. It is quite probable that her unwanted pregnancies had an impact on her emotional bonding with her children. Though her youngest children are sympathetic to their mother, it does not seem that Subornolota is emotionally close to any of her children. In *Meghna Podma* when Torulota finds out that she is pregnant again she expresses an intense feeling of hatred towards her husband. This attitude towards motherhood also changed slightly with the change in the structure and size of the family and the improvement in the status of girls. We see the pleasure Uma takes in the birth of her daughter and her sense of pride in her motherhood. Despite the poverty, Lota enjoys her motherhood and her relationship with her little son Daku. Similarly Shita in *Sworolipi* finds solace and a reason to live in her daughter Mithu. With families being planned and women, to a large extent, being able to determine when they would become mothers, motherhood became less of a nightmare for many Bengali women. Particularly in the case of mothers of daughters, frequently they became supportive mothers rather than mute instruments of patriarchy.

An interesting and complex area of study is the older women who function as quasi-matriarchs in the family. It seems that they derive some power from their roles as custodians of the patriarchal values and traditions. They try to transform their menial status by collaborating with the powers-that-be and help turn their wish into law in the *ondormohol.* It has frequently been commented that elderly women rule the inner quarters. It is my argument that they rule by proxy and their dictates are not so much their wishes but

measures being taken to propagate and preserve the patriarchal tradition. The patriarch may not be concerned about the nitty-gritty of daily living but the policies by which the household runs are framed by him. As we have seen in the case of Chhobi's grandmother Purnoshoshi, it is her grandfather Dokshinaronjon's command that has the highest priority in the household. Gradually, when he becomes infirm, it passes on to his elder son Kuloda. Yet this identification with the patriarch's desires and commands is not so one-dimensional that Purnoshoshi plays prison warder unquestioningly. Later she questions her years of identifying herself as the preserver of patriarchal traditions and practices that warped the lives of younger women and little girls. She fashioned the *ondormohol* that was a symbol of the high status of the feudal family, but apart from the power she has over the powerless women she has no sway over the family. The men take the important decisions and like the rest of the women she is expected to go along with them.

Like Purnoshoshi, Muktokeshi rules over the *ondormohol* in Ashapurna Devi's *Subornolota.* Apparently Muktokeshi wields more power than Purnoshoshi. She is the widowed mother of four sons who consider it their foremost duty to uphold the wishes of their mother. There is no denying that she has a lot of influence over her sons but it is also apparent that she is herself also ruled by the patriarchal system. She is simply carrying out her duties as the custodian of a traditional system, which has governed her life as well as a wife and a mother. She upholds the hierarchical relations where the sons are the lord and masters of their wives whose functions are limited to running the household smoothly and giving the family its descendents. The limitations of her power are evident in the fact that though she asks Probodh to throw out Subornolota, he does not do so. She also finds it difficult to get her sons to fund everything as she wants. When her youngest daughter Biraj was to get married, Muktokeshi would have found it difficult to meet the expectations of the groom's family had it not been for the generosity of Subornolota who gave her wedding sari and jewellery. Muktokeshi is an accomplished politician who has learnt over her long life how to pull the strings so that her position is unchallenged and her sons continue to defer to her. So she schemes

continually, preventing sons and their wives from forming close relationships. She implements a divide-and-rule policy in the *ondormohol* so that the daughters-in-law do not come together on a common ground and are usually against each other. As for her daughters, she welcomes their visits when they are wealthy and it serves her purpose. So she forgets Subola who is poor and has many children while making much of Suraj whose husband is well off. The hollowness of her position becomes apparent to her when she visits her sister-in-law Shyamasundori. The deep affection that Shyamasundori's son Jogu has for his mother, even though they are fighting a legal battle against each other over Jogu's father's will, makes Muktokeshi think about what her sons really feel about her. She emerges as a lonely woman who acquired some power in her family but no love or sympathy, except from the one who opposed her most, Subornolota. When she is dying and people are reluctant to visit her in her room, she requests to see Subornolota. It is Subornolota who has the heart to buy flowers for Muktokeshi's funeral and persuades her eldest brother-in-law to hold a *kangali bhojon* (meal for the poor). Similarly Purnoshoshi also appears as a lonely woman towards the end, with everything taken from her, empty as a shell. The illusion about her position in the family is exposed and she finds herself friendless, far removed from her sons, daughters and daughters-in-law.

Conclusion

The relationship that women share with the family and community is a complex one. While women were encouraged to identify themselves with their familial roles, their links with the family were usually quite tenuous. Born as someone's daughter, they were frequently made aware that this was a temporary state of being and it was like they had been handed a short-term identity card. They became wives only to learn the finery of the wedding night was a sop to hide the fact that it was a hard life. To keep their body and soul together they had to serve the family with hard labour and provide them with male offspring. Their position in the marital home was never secure and frequently women would be sent off to their natal home temporarily or permanently for some real or imaginary error, either committed by them or their family. At such times the natal family did not feel happy to see their

daughters come back. When abandoned by both families, women would take to begging or prostitution. Childless widows were frequently placed in difficult positions and many had to live their life in abject misery. However, the spate of reforms and the impact of the socio-political upheaval in the wake of colonialism and emergence of the Brahmo Somaj meant that some women had qualitatively better lives. With an improvement in their status within the household and the breakdown in the authority of the joint family, many women tried to ensure that their daughters had better lives. We see this in the case of Jyotirmoyee Devi, who had to leave her marital home after being widowed with six children. Not only did she establish herself as an author but also brought up her daughters to be their own person. Her life story shows the vacuum that suddenly engulfed her life with the death of her husband. In a scenario where women identify themselves solely in terms of their familial roles, she did not feel herself to be the daughter of the house when she came back to her parents, and she was not a wife any more. Widowhood, as she felt, was a negation of everything. She did not belong anywhere and her existence was that of a cipher. Gradually she formed other sustaining relationships that helped her to search for her identity afresh in other, more fulfilling terms. She became an author, a social activist and a feminist voice for later generations of women.

The novels depict the gradual change in the traditional roles in a woman's life. The life cycle of the female characters are perceived to be continuing along the known axes of daughterhood, wifehood and motherhood, but their experience of these roles changes as the domestic sphere experiences radical transformations due to colonialism. Daughters still struggle through their childhood but girls like Minu and Chhobi, Suhasini and Bonya are the beneficiaries of a turbulent social order that is trying to define the new woman. Their childhood becomes more dynamic and full of possibilities as a result of various factors like maternal initiatives, female education and nuclear families. Wives like Uma and Lota have companionate relationships with their husbands, helping each other out with their duties and responsibilities. The blurring of the public/personal divide was responsible to a great extent in bringing a change in the operation of marital relationships. The relationships,

in many cases, especially among young couples like Uma and Obhijit, Meghjit and Uttora, Lota and Sulokkhon, Meghi and Ali, Shompa and Sotyoban, look more like a partnership. These couples cooperate and work with each other both in the personal and public sphere, which is not seen in the older couples where the women's activities are limited to the *ondormohol*. The responsibility for the domestic work remained with women but men are more seen to be assisting their spouses. However on the reverse side of the coin there are couples like Parul and her husband where the hierarchical relationship is sought to be maintained and the wife is more a property than a partner. Ashapurna Devi's trilogy portrays both the force of change and the resistance to it, in the lives of Subornolota and her four daughters. There is the suggestion that the novels explore familial relationships and female identities within this sphere, both in terms of what they were and what they could be. Particularly in Ashapurna Devi and Sabitri Ray's work, which are composed on an epical scale, we get a sense of gradual transformation within the world of the home and the many possibilities it can create in women's lives.

While there was no revolutionary change in women's sense of their identity during this time in the twentieth century with the society still trying to emphasise their familial roles and responsibilities, women started identifying themselves in other ways as well. Many women as we have seen earlier became involved with the freedom struggle, which gave them a new sense of purpose and confidence in their abilities. Their sense of the self was enriched and they saw themselves as socially useful beings. In a strange way this helped enhance their familial roles. As they felt their perception of the self expanding, they became better wives and mothers, intellectually and emotionally more sustaining to their husbands and children. Particularly for girls growing up in this era, it became possible for the first time to identify positively with their familial roles, which did not move mountains as far as the social structure was concerned but helped them have more fulfilling lives, even if only as wives and mothers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The years 1930-1955 were years of promises, heartbreaks and hardship for Bengali women. The struggle for independence held out a promise for them, as indeed all disadvantaged people, that in the free nation their lot would improve. However, the freedom of the nation came with the price tag of Partition. For many women whose lives had been radically affected by Partition, it was a 'terrible' birth of new life, which also brought opportunities in its wake. The traditions that middle class Bengali society professed to be sacred fell into abeyance as the social, political and economic structure of the nation struggled to cope with social fragmentation, dismemberment and large-scale dislocation. Historical exigencies created new roles for middle class women to play, new identities to inhabit.

The novels of Jyotirmoyi Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal have enabled a nuanced examination of the politics of identity through this turbulent period. They validate the selection of women's fictional writings as source material for a fresh perspective on 'her story' in the late colonial and early post-colonial period. As realistic novels firmly located in the historical substratum, these novels explore with great sensitivity the narrative of ordinary middle class Bengali women across rural and urban Bengal, offering subtle insights into the response of the private realm of the family and society to public events and material changes. They delineate the multi-dimensional negotiations of middle class women, in keeping with their economic and social position, with the different ideological, material and emotional factors that impinged on their lives. Most importantly, these novels illuminate the complex emotional world of middle class Bengali women, as they struggled to 'become' at a point in time which can perhaps be best described as a historical cross-road. In her memoir Jyotirmoyi Devi writes that women are not *sotyoboti* (tellers of truth). They conceal the bitter, unpalatable truth of their lives that is ultimately consumed in their funeral pyres.[222] Fictional writings are the only source where female experiences and the female emotional world can be revealed in all its complexity and harshness. Even autobiographical sources

[222] Jyotirmoyi Devi, *Smriti Bismritir Torongo*, p. 84.

can be and often are quite 'economical' in their portrayal of the personal sphere.

The novels examined here depict the transitions that the lives of ordinary middle class women experienced across the geographical spectrum, in the villages, small towns and in cities like Calcutta and Dhaka. In a fundamental way these novels are also empowering, for in them the marginalised sections of society are allowed their subjectivity and their narrative, even if mediated by an authorial voice. While the gender history of the nineteenth century focuses on the 'elite', the *bhodromohila*, who were the pioneers in many spheres and created new models for other women to aspire to and follow, these novels suggest the beginning of a new chapter of gender history in Bengal, as the focus moves on to the ordinary women in 'conservative' middle class Hindu families, denied both intellectual and financial resources. If the nineteenth century politics of identity created the mould of the *bhodromohila*, the novels depict how the social structure that spawned this 'ideal' was rapidly changing with the onslaught of national and international events like the famine and war and then finally, the partition of India.

In these rapidly changing social and economic circumstances, women found that they had to work towards newer goals. Women not only had to look after themselves, in the absence of men they were also responsible for the well being of young children and the old. Women had to learn new skills in the fight for survival which were quite remote from the *bhodromohila* ideal. When they relocated to the towns and cities in the wake of the famine and queued before ration shops or relief kitchens, or when they tried to rebuild their lives as refugees after partition in forcibly occupied plots of land and *kutchcha* hutments in the new colonies, middle class women took up roles that were at odds with the specifications of the *bhodromohila* role. I will go so far as to say that these role models from the nineteenth century were becoming increasingly irrelevant for the women as they fought to claim the meagre resources that the state allocated and those that could be had from the competitive open market. The novels portray how new codes of conduct were being framed to cope with unprecedented social and economic crises. Even

as young women were struggling in this battle of survival, older women too were transforming themselves to stay alive in the changed world.

There is also the emergence of the newer patriarchy, which is perceived to be more liberal and enlightened than the older one. In both Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal's novels, we find the young men with their communist ideology to be the harbingers of this new patriarchy. They are aware and to an extent sensitive to the asymmetrical gender relations and the resultant exploitation of women. They espouse the cause of women who work towards economic self reliance so that they can counter the abuse and discrimination at home. They also believe that women should be freed from the drudgery of their domestic roles. Yet, at the same time, they themselves place women in supportive ancillary roles, expecting the women in their families to cook and clean for them as their helpmeets while they engage in the serious business of fighting class oppression and exploitation. They believe that women should not be limited to their domestic roles, but they do not envisage themselves sharing or taking entire responsibility for the domestic chores. They are also myopic in not being able to visualise dynamic roles for women and at worst women are obstacles in their path and at best they are aides and supporters. Someone like Sagori trespasses her given role within the political organisation when she goes out to the rural areas to work amongst the peasants for *Tebhaga*. There is also the suggestion of the fading away of the older order, in the shape of people like Shita and Bonya's father. Bonya's father Indrokumar is distressed and confused about the changes but he does not live to see Partition. Shita's father, on the other hand, struggles to cope with the new way of life in the refugee colony even while his wife Promila actively joins the fight for survival.

The novels illustrate the gradual politicisation of many aspects of life and work. The integral relation of the struggles that are being carried on in the public sphere to those within the private sphere are continually worked out in the narratives. If a Chhobi decides to work for the famine relief, that will have an impact on the family and its patriarchal structure. Similarly the nationalist struggle for independence draws attention to the state of the girls in Ombika's

village. This atmosphere of political struggle percolates into other areas like the workplace. The vocabulary of struggle and rights and exploitation is brought on when Deboki argues with the matron about Sushila's treatment as a member of staff at the TB hospital. We see this consciousness among the women of the refugee colony as they participate in meetings and marches. While this consciousness may or may not radically change the lives of the women, it does suggest a new way of thinking about everyday life and its problems.

Another important facet of the changing lives of middle class women was their increased mobility. The nineteenth century was rife with young men travelling to the towns and cities for their education and for work. This spatial mobility also led to a social mobility as young men from not very well off rural families would travel to urban centres, helped by scholarships or the benevolence of some wealthy patron to improve their social and economic position in society. In these novels we have the female counterparts of these young men, travelling away from their rural homes to change their lives around like Deboki. Or it is sometimes for education, like little Chhobi travelling to the town with her aunt or later to Calcutta for her further studies. Deboki travels when she is forced to leave her marital home due to abuse and physical violence and her parents cannot keep her in their straitened circumstances. Earlier on she had travelled to the nearby town for her brief educational career. Meghi also travels to Calcutta to make a life with her beloved Ali. From the various autobiographies from this period, we see that there were some young girls who made journeys to urban centres for their higher education. From the novels it appears that women were also economic migrants, who came into towns and cities hoping that they would be able to get decent jobs and live dignified lives. There is also the increasing mobility of the women within the towns and cities themselves, as women travelled to go to schools and colleges and places of work. Evidently women were now more involved in their own self-definition, displaying greater agency even in adverse circumstances.

In these novels female education continues to be a site of struggle for women. It is perceived to be a privilege that many women are without. It is depicted as enabling and therefore potentially revolutionary and subversive. It enables someone like Deboki to earn a living for herself when she comes out of her abusive marriage and it is instrumental in the way Chhobi is able to challenge the authority of her grandfather. It is a battle for Subornolota to educate the girls in the family and later in her life to educate her youngest daughter Bokul. Yet, the authors are also emphatic that education is a tool and like any tool its impact is dependent on who uses it and how. Ashapurna Devi in her trilogy depicts the radical, empowering potential of female education as well as how it can be rendered ineffective and regressive. Eventually education by itself has a limited potential but becomes instrumental according to the ideology of the person or system imparting education and the person receiving it.

One of the tangible impacts of female education can be perceived in the sphere of work. An interesting insight that the novels offer is the range of work that women are able to do, some of which is by virtue of their education. The authors are not talking about waged work only. In fact waged work forms a small percentage of the work that women do. The political movements and the social catastrophes of the period bring women into many kinds of work which they would not have done earlier. Women start working in relief kitchens, writing posters, doing translations and writing political articles, making clothes for children in the slums, or putting on plays for famine relief. Some of this work could be undertaken by educated women only, while others were putting their domestic skills to use in other spheres. Hence, the range of women's work expanded as a result of the other social and political events. These novels also render problematic the relation of waged work and women's emancipation, where waged work is often appropriated by the family. The waged work done by women is frequently seen as an extension of the familial roles and responsibilities and many women undertook waged work to serve the needs of the family. But even when waged work was undertaken for familial necessities, it allowed women a better status in the family and more decision-making powers.

The strong socialisation into familial roles is evident in the novels. Individualistic and independent female characters like Deboki, Shita, Bonya grant primacy to their familial roles whenever there is a conflict between their familial identities and their other roles and responsibilities. Yet, what is significant is the emergence of non-familial identities and roles as powerful and significant in the lives of middle class women. The delineation of the subjectivities of these various female characters illustrate that when the familial identities take over the lives of the women, it is an agonising struggle. When the widowed Shita has to face the conflicting emotions as a widow of Debojyoti in a traditional family and society and the overwhelming love that she feels for Prithwi, she suppresses her love but it is a painful decision for her. Similarly when Bonya decides to 'return' to the family fold to take care of the needs of her mother, siblings and nieces and nephew, she is ravaged in the war between familial and non-familial identities. It is only after the death of her mother-in-law that Shita can accept Prithwi into her life, while Bonya sacrifices her artist self at the altar of her daughterhood. The other radical possibility of these emerging individualistic identities is seen in the taboos that some of the female characters transcend in the novels. When Bhodra formalises her relationship with Partho, she breaks out of the regulations that structure the life of a high caste Hindu widow, as well as crossing the boundaries of caste and class. The relationship of Meghi and Ali is also created across and beyond the perimeters of religion and religious strictures. These 'unusual' relationships are radical in the possibilities they suggest for other women, beyond their familial identities and membership of kinship networks.

The novels also show how the traditional familial roles are becoming complex in a society and nation that are undergoing a transformation. The usual familial relationships are explored in depth to reveal the complex facets of what are traditional roles. Motherhood and the mother-child relationship is shown to be changing, as mothers of daughters become more supportive and sustaining influences in the lives of the daughters. There are many sustaining relationships formed within and outside the immediate family amongst women and between men and women. For Subornolota, her relationship with

Joyaboti, a distant relation is like a breath of fresh air as is her relationship with the revolutionary Ombika. For Bonya a chance meeting with Meghjit and Jyotirmoy helps her discover the artist in herself, leading to a sense of fulfilment that went a long way in filling the void caused by her mother's rejection of her. All these relationships are very significant as they occupy a space beyond the conventional familial relationships and assist in enhancing these women's sense of their self. Men and women share all kinds of relationships – sometimes men are oppressors and predators, while at other times they are partners in mutually supportive relationships.

The novels hold the nineteenth century reformative vision up for scrutiny. In a novel like *Subornolota*, Ashapurna Devi shows that for all the ideas and legislations, women could be helpless and trapped within institutions like marriage and family. Women like Sukumari in *Nobankur*, wonder if life would be different for the likes of Chhobi if they had those chances to educate themselves that had been denied to Sukumari, Binti and Lotu. Shita and Bonya, even when they are working and independent, find their lives and conduct being scrutinised by a family and society that is keenly awaiting the opportunity to denounce them as women of dubious 'reputation'. The liberal model for emancipation of women that presupposes that education, political and legal rights and access to economic resources will empower women and improve their status is shown to be flawed. Women with education, political rights and waged work have 'better' lives than women who lack these but despite these tools they are still subject to humiliation, abuse and exploitation and unequal, oppressive relationships. Subornolota, in her own way, conceptualises this problem when she tells Ombika how pointless all his efforts towards female education are till the disease-ridden body of society is cured (p. 245). Education, political rights, economic resources are in themselves nothing more than tools which might bring benefits if used effectively. These may change society materially, even structurally but the change in ideas and ideology is difficult to bring about. It takes sheer power of the will and support of family and/or friends for women like Sotyoboti, Chhobi, Deboki, Bonya to transcend and triumph over the discriminatory social mores and ideas that have been 'naturalised'.

Finally, the novels read in this thesis reveal the multi-faceted identity of Bengali middle class women. The authors have not rejected or denigrated the traditional roles of women as wife and mother, which are deemed by patriarchal society to be the 'essential' roles of a woman. They have, however, been emphatic that women are much more than wives and mothers. The authors have claimed for Bengali women a much larger world than men would concede to them, and many more roles. The novels have made subjects of those Bengali women who have been erased from history and the varied dimensions of individual women have also been explored. The life of the Bengali woman had changed in a changing world. She had been fashioning her identity in keeping with the changes. In spite of the hard time women faced after Partition, they were optimistic and the situation seemed promising as it seemed a new social order would emerge. Yet it was not quite a brave new world – the novels bid us not to forget Subornolota, Lotu, Binti pishi, Onno and others like them whose lives did not see new light. The mirror showed a new, forward-looking Bengali woman but the shadow of the old one was never far away.

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Appendix

Biographical notes on authors and synopsis of texts

Jyotirmoyee Devi was born in 1894 into a large joint family that lived in Rajasthan where her grandfather was the prime minister to the ruler of Jaipur. The degradation and abuse of women was well known to this woman who had been married at the age of ten and widowed at the age of twenty-six with six children. Like many other Bengali girls she was not formally initiated into education but along with the other children of the household learned basic reading and writing skills from a *Ponditmoshai.* There was also a teacher for Hindi. The elders also engaged a teacher for Sanskrit and another for English but they taught only the boys. After a year or two of instruction, she continued to read the large number of books and periodicals in the family library. Simultaneously she was being trained in the household chores as she was reaching the marriageable age of ten. Jyotirmoyee and her elder sister were brought to Calcutta and married off. Jyotirmoyee spent the next sixteen years of her life with her husband and in-laws looking after the family and bearing six children. In her memoir *Smriti Bismritir Torongo* she describes how the little girl was tormented in her marital home, from not being allowed to wear the sari that her husband got her, which was given to some one else, to not being allowed to visit her natal home on festive occasions like weddings. When Jyotirmoyee lost her husband she went with her six children, the oldest of whom was ten and the youngest four months, to her natal home in Jaipur. She suddenly found herself neither among the living nor the dead, in a shelter but with a feeling of homelessness; there was overwhelming grief, a feeling of hopelessness and of being rudderless. However Jyotirmoyee started reading and writing a few awkward pieces. At this time her grandfather handed her John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women.* Later she came to Calcutta to arrange the wedding of her sister and daughter. This stay opened a different world before her, and her uncle, aunt and brothers made it possible for her to educate herself, read profusely, engage in debates and discussions and write. There were sympathetic critics who also helped her to grow as a person, a scholar and an author. She wrote extensively, publishing number of short stories and novels and prose on relevant issues. She became an active

Gandhian, espousing the cause of those marginalised and socially oppressed. In her works she portrays women's unequal battle against injustice, abuse and dehumanisation, sometimes verging on the pathetic, at other times tragic, and sometimes courageous and glorious.

Epar Ganga Opar Ganga is one of the few works of fiction that address the issue of violation of women during partition in 1947. In a powerful foreword to the novel Jyotirmoyee Devi writes that no male author has been able to write the story of women's humiliation and shame: 'No history has recorded that tragic chapter of shame and humiliation that is forever controlled by the husband, the son, the father and their race'.[223] In the *Mahabharata* Vyasa tried to write an episode called the *Stri Parva* that tells the story of what happened to the women of *Yadu* clan after Krishna died. There was a state of total anarchy. Bandits came and insulted and humiliated the women of the family, some of whom were killed while others were abducted even as the brave Arjuna was unable to lift his *Gandiva* bow to save them. Vyasa does not give a complete account of the episode and it becomes a tale of death and bereavement for everyone, men and women. Jyotirmoyee says that Vyasa was unable to write about the incident:

> Which male poet would dare to write about that, and with what ink? No, such a pen, such ink and paper have not yet been produced in the world. The writer of the epic was a male, after all. He could not possibly describe the savage acts of barbarism, the exploitation of the female body by a group of cowards. His pen refused to move in shame, and that is why the male poet has left these stories out.
>
> History is not written by cowards, and there are no women epic poets. Even if there were, they could hardly write the stories of their own dishonour and shame. The language for it has yet to be fashioned, so naturally the *Stri Parva* does not figure anywhere.[224]

Her novel is based in Noakhali, the site of some of the worst communal riots and atrocities in the days leading up to the partition. Gandhi personally came to Noakhali after the carnage to oversee relief and rescue efforts and to bring

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[223] Jyotirmoyee Devi, 'Author's Note' in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, trans. Enakshi Chatterjee (Calcutta: Stree, 1995), p. xxxv.
[224] *Ibid*, p. xxxv.

about peace and sanity to the region. Sutara Dutta is a young girl who gets caught in the riots. The male servants in the house help rioters to burn the house. Her father is killed, while her mother drowns herself in the tank behind the house to protect her honour and her sister goes missing. Sutara is found unconscious by her father's friend Tamij Kaka who brings her home. She is nursed and cared for by Tamij Kaka's wife and daughter Sakina, who is also Sutara's friend. What exactly had happened to Sutara becomes the great unspoken focal point of the novel. Tamij Kaka understands that Sutara wants to get back to her brother and only surviving relation in Calcutta and contacts them. Her brother is not keen to take her back and finally Tamij Kaka dresses Sutara up as his daughter and takes her to Calcutta to her brother. In a Calcutta that was also divided along communal lines, Sutara finds her brother living with his in-laws, as his house was not in a 'safe' area. In that household Sutara finds herself treated as an untouchable whose presence itself is polluting. She finds herself kept out of the pure space of the kitchen, as her touch would defile the food. What had happened to her in that riot broods in the centre of the novel. Also having lived with Muslims for some months, she has lost caste and ritual purity. As a solution to their problem, her relations send her to a boarding school and she lives there with other orphans and destitute children even during the holidays. She grows up in these impersonal spaces outside the home till she graduates and gets a job in a women's college in faraway Delhi. There amidst a fraternity of women who have suffered the partition in Punjab, Sutara, a teacher of history, wonders about the narration of history, about what it says and what it fails to say. It is when Promod asks her to wait for him to come back and marry her that she suddenly realises that her long exile may be over. It may be possible to come back from the periphery.

Ashapurna Devi was born in 1909. From her own writings we gather that she spent her childhood in a large middle class joint family where boys were treated as jewels and girls were the excess who would be offloaded as soon as they became of marriageable age. Girls did not go to school in such families and Ashapurna thinks that she learnt to read by sitting opposite her brothers when they were studying. So she read everything upside down,

which caused great amusement in the family. Consequently she had to remedy that by getting hold of her brothers' books and looking at them the right side up to see how the letters were really like. Since she had committed the contents to memory she would have to simply match the words recorded in memory to the print that she saw. This is how her education started but no one ever prevented her from reading. Her mother was an avid reader and did not think that reading of literature ought to be censored. Ashapurna started publishing from the age of thirteen in a children's magazine and was steadily encouraged by the editors who encouraged the budding writer to flower. Her powerful writing coupled with her unusual name made many established writers like Sajanikanta Das and Premendra Mitra think that it was a man writing with a female pen name. Having been married by the time she was fifteen to a bank official she remained a private *grihobodhu* (housewife) except for her literary excursions into the public world. As a young girl she had two desires, to read a lot and to travel. So she thought that it would be nice to be married to a librarian or to a railway official. She could not travel, but when the family moved to Calcutta she could indulge her desire for reading once again. Ashapurna in her personal life played the traditional roles that were expected of her but the degradation and humiliation of women that she saw in her daily life led to the spirit of revolt that comes across in her characters like Sotyoboti and Subornolota. As she says in one of her essays *Ya dekhi, tai likhi* (I write what I see), 'I have not written about politics or about social reformers. I have written about ordinary women in middle class homes. However they are about those women only who are unable to accept their intolerable circumstances. If it came to that, they either left home or husband.' Ashapurna is quite clear that she is not a reformer and in her writings she does not try to suggest 'what ought to be'. Her writing is about portraying things as they are and wondering why they are as they are. She says that whatever that she has seen within the ambit of ordinary middle class life has been the subject of her writing.

Subornolota is the second volume of Ashapurna Devi's popular trilogy also comprising *Prothom Protishruti* and *Bokulkotha.* The trilogy etches the society of middle class Hindu Bengalis in Calcutta primarily through the life and

perspective of three generations of women: Sotyoboti, her daughter Subornolota and Subornolota's youngest daughter Bokul. Sotyoboti is born to a renowned and successful *Kobiraj* (practitioner of traditional medicine) Ramkali and his wife Bhuboneswari in rural Bengal. Ramkali was a Brahmin who had lost caste by virtue of learning the science of traditional medicine. Sotyoboti lives in a large joint family with uncles, aunts and cousins. While the boys of the family had educational instruction, girls like Sotyoboti are not only not taught but it is believed that they would become widows if they learnt to write. Sotyoboti is self-taught as she watches her brothers and cousins struggling with their letters. A gifted and spirited girl, she uses her education, to the consternation of one and all, to compose a poem that mocks the masculinity of a man who could only express his prowess by beating his weak and ailing wife. Sotyoboti is married young by Ramkali in keeping with the custom of *gouridan* (literally means 'bequeathing *gouri*' where the girl must be given in marriage by her eighth year till which age she is known as *gouri*) but her father wants her to stay on at her natal home for some more years. However soon her in-laws asks her father to send her to them to take care of her 'real' home and threatens that if he did not send her they would wed their son to another. So Sotyoboti is suddenly sent off to her husband's home. Being a strong spirited girl Sotyoboti does some plain speaking even to her 'ogre' of a mother-in-law and quickly earns the fearful respect of all including her cowardly husband Nobokumar. The young couple move to the city later on, enabling Sotyoboti to do what she never had the opportunity of doing in her childhood. She learns English and even teaches in a school, and she sends little Subornolota to school hoping that she will have a better life than her mother. Subornolota's relation with her mother is one of awe and affection. Soytoboti is perhaps more stern than other mothers are as she drives Subornolota to excel in her studies so as to get out of the drudgery that is a woman's life in Bengal. Hence when the little Subornolota has the opportunity to flee her studies and visit her grandmother with her father she is quite happy to go. Here her grandmother, with the passive assistance of her father, marries her off before Sotyoboti has a chance to reach the village. As Sotyoboti realises what has happened and the fact that the marriage will not be annulled she refuses to get out of the palanquin and goes back to Calcutta.

At the end of *Prothom Protishruti* Sotyoboti leaves her husband's home to go to Kashi to question the *pondits* (scholars in the Sanskritic tradition) about the destiny of a woman's life. Sotyoboti never comes back.

Subornolota is about the marital life of Subornolota. Subornolota realises only too late that getting married was not as attractive as her grandmother had made it out to be with all the wedding finery. As far as Subornolota is concerned her wedding is a tragic event as it also signifies the death of her mother, as that is the last time she sees Sotyoboti. Subornolota feels her mother has abandoned her when she needed her most. She is her mother's daughter, as her in-laws never fail to remind her, and she too calls a spade a spade. Needless to say her forthrightness and her refusal to submit to any authority does not make her very popular. Her husband is absolutely besotted with her beauty but finds it frustrating that Subornolota is not a pliable wife ready to please her husband. However Subornolota is unable to escape him at night when she must gratify his sexual desires. Subornolota realises that no matter how unbearable the house and its members are with their crude ways and unenlightened mindset, she has nowhere to go. When she takes refuge in her father's house after a quarrel, he and her brother talk about a woman's 'real home' and Subornolota feels acutely her 'homelessness'. Subornolota hopes that her life will be different when her husband builds a new house and asks him to build a high balcony from where she could look out into the world. Her husband promises her he will but when she moves to the house she realises he has lied to her about the construction of the balcony so that she would not deny him sexual pleasures. This betrayal leaves her stunned.

She is a nationalist at heart but engages with the fight for freedom at an intellectual level as being a housewife in a conservative Hindu middle class family she is unable to do anything physically or materially. She tries hard to ensure that the new generation comprising her children and those of the other brothers-in-law grow up to be liberal enlightened human beings irrespective of their sexes. She is disappointed as the boys grow up to be men in the mould of their father and uncles and the girls in the mould of their grandmother and aunts, except for Subornolota's two youngest daughters. Much of the growing-

up years of the two girls Parul and Bokul are spent in the new house when their father decides to live separately from the joint family with Subornolota and the children. Consequently they are away from the influence of their grandmother Muktokeshi and able to engage in reading, writing and broadening their minds. Though much derided by their brothers they write: Parul poetry and Bokul fiction. Subornolota tries hard to ensure that Bokul has formal education without much success and then she gives up on the family and life in general and just waits for death. In a sense she abandons Bokul much the same way that Sotyoboti had abandoned her.

Bokul survives in the interstices of everyone's neglect and is witness to the one act that probably is a defining moment for her. Sotyoboti had left a letter for Subornolota to be delivered to her after Sotyoboti dies. In her letter Sotyoboti writes that she left for Kashi after Subornolota's wedding because there was no other way open to her. The way the nine-year-old Subornolota had been married and the social decree that the marriage once performed could never be annulled compelled Sotyoboti to seek the *Pondits* in Kashi for clarifications about the Hindu wedding. She wanted to ask the Sanskrit scholars about the significance of the Hindu wedding, its aims and whether it was an indissoluble bond. After receiving this letter, Subornolota decides to write about her life to reach out to the other women who were living and dying like her. There is a fiasco about getting that manuscript printed and Subornolota quietly takes the badly printed copies to the terrace and sets fire to them. Bokul witnesses her mother perform this act. Subornolota dies slowly having refused all medical treatment. For Bokul a new life begins after the death of Subornolota, as the girl who always seemed to apologetic about her existence learns to survive and establish her personhood. *Bokulkotha* narrates the life of Bokul in her father's house living with her brothers and their families as a young woman. Bokul starts writing under the pen name of Onamika Debi where Onamika means one without a name. However Onamika gains both name and fame, as Bokul becomes a renowned writer. She does not marry and as per her father's will she inhabits a solitary room on the top floor of a house the rest of which has been divided amongst her brothers.

Sabitri Ray was born in Dhaka in 1918 to a middle class Hindu family. Her father lived in Faridpur and Sabitri went to a boys' school in a nearby village. Later she went to Calcutta for further education at Bethune College. She was also trained as a teacher and she taught for a while in Madaripur and Munshigunj. At the age of twenty-two she married Santimoy Ray. They were both involved with the communist movement and Santimoy was imprisoned more than once. Due to her close contact with the movement Sabitri Ray was able to see the malaise that had set into the structure of the party. Many workers are likely to have been aware of the shortcomings of the party as Sabitri was. Manikuntala Sen, for example, another communist party worker, writes in her autobiography about some of the shortcomings of the party but this came much later, towards the end of her life. At the time when she was an active party member Manikuntala did not voice any criticism of the party even though she may have had reservation about many things. The party operated in such a manner that it did not accommodate any divergent views or criticisms. In her work Sabitri Ray's characters are mostly affiliated to the communist movement, as this was the movement that she knew best. Her criticism is particularly trenchant in *Sworolipi* where she writes in detail about the ideological tussle within the party, which was in many ways a cover for usurping power by certain individuals. Her husband stayed neutral and distant in this tussle between the party and Sabitri. Later Sabitri gave up her membership of the party. She continued to write and has given us amazing documents that show various aspects of the turbulent times, from the political machinations to the struggle of the refugees living like cattle in a state that was ill prepared to receive such a population. As her daughter Gargi Chakravartty notes, her mother developed a sensitive understanding of the lives and trials of the refugees as they lived at the edge of a refugee colony. Both Santimoy and Sabitri offered voluntary service to shelter, protect and transport people affected by the riots in Calcutta and closely interacted with the displaced people. Sabitri Ray's writings are quite radical in their political views as well as in her portrayal of women and social practices. Consequently it does not come as a surprise that her works were not available in print for a long time and neither do many libraries have copies of them. It is only recently

that efforts are being made to bring to the readers the entire corpus of her fictional writings.

Trisrota is Sabitri Roy's second novel and was published in 1950. It is a complex novel that explores the various political ideologies that inspired the people of Bengal and the conflicts that ensued. The protagonist Podma

and Ray portrays this grim battle as Orunabho and Bipasha with their comrades work amongst these people. At the end of the book Podma stands alone with her daughter as Orunabho is away and the police have arrested Bishworup.

Sworolipi was published in 1952 and resulted in Roy eventually resigning from the party. The book was severely critical of the workings of the communist party and the party had asked her to withdraw the book, which she refused. The party next banned the book. This book is about Prithwi, Shita, Pholgu, Rothi, Sagori among others. Prithwi comes back after imprisonment to find that the woman he had loved and rejected in the cause of the revolution, Shita, had married another and was now the mother of a daughter. It gradually becomes apparent to Prithwi that it is possible to accommodate personal affections amidst the striving for social justice. However the realisation comes too late and he has lost Shita. Shita is soon widowed after her husband, who had been suffering from tuberculosis since serving his jail term, dies. She takes up a teaching job in a school to look after her daughter Mithu and her old mother-in-law. It is Mithu who one day befriends Prithwi in a park and brings him home to her mother. Thus, Prithwi and Shita meet each other again after about seven years. Meanwhile there are Prithwi's friends Rothi and Sagori, both dedicated members of the communist party who get married. When Rothi is expelled from the party due to his differences with the party, Sagori is asked by the party to leave him. Sagori, in her zeal to prove her absolute commitment to the party acquiesces and is subsequently chosen to work for a high-ranking party leader. She is thrilled at being chosen for this role, not knowing that she is the sexual interest of the leader. Through Sagori we see the lavish lifestyle of the so-called peasant leaders and the dictatorial style in which they run the party with scant regard for the well being of the ordinary workers. Sagori can no longer go back to Rothi and leaves the city to work among the peasants as Comrade Joba and is eventually killed while leading a peasant movement. Shita's brother Pholgu who is disillusioned with the largely urban leadership also goes to work among the peasants. Prithwi is also expelled from the party as they disagree with his writings. Among the peasants we see the conflicting instructions coming in from the urban

leadership who do not understand the dynamics of the rural relationship between landless labour, sharecroppers, middle level farmers and the large landowners. We also witness the trauma of riots and partition and how people become refugees. Shita's parents are forced to leave everything behind to come to Calcutta where they occupy a land along with some other refugees and set up their shanty home. We see the pitched battle being fought between the landowners who are not ready to lose the land and the dispossessed, displaced people. During these times Shita goes back to East Pakistan to be with her mother-in-law who is stuck there and is ill. After the death of the old woman as the communal tension between the communities worsens, she attempts to leave with her daughter Mithu. The police stop the boat, which also carries a comrade, and Shita is imprisoned. Little Mithu comes back to Calcutta without her mother. The struggle for social justice continues as Shita's friends continue their fight to get her released.

Paka Dhaner Gan, supposed to be Roy's 'magnum opus' was published in three parts in 1956, 1957 and 1958. A consolidated edition was published in 1986. In this novel Sabitri Ray explores the lives of Partho, Deboki, Bhodra, Sulokkhon, Lota, Meghi and others. Partho is a revolutionary on the run from the police who takes shelter briefly with his old school teacher Dinonath, Deboki's father. This brief stay makes it possible for Deboki and her sister Ketoki to go to a girls' school in another village as Partho requests the father to educate his girls. He arranges with Ishani Debi who runs the school that one girl can stay for free at the school boarding and is waived the tuition fee. However Deboki's good fortune ends soon when she is married to Rajen who taunts and beats her. Even Partho cannot save her. In the meanwhile partho is imprisoned and while in prison accepts the communist ideology and becomes a member of the party. After his release he comes to Calcutta and rents a room in Bhodra and her old father-in-law's flat. Bhodra is a young widow. Her husband had gone abroad soon after the wedding to pursue his studies. There he had fallen in love with someone and unable to sort his life between these two women he had committed suicide. Bhodra teaches at a school and takes care of her father-in-law who loves her like a daughter. Partho finds that Bhodra is sympathetic to the cause and tells her that she is

needed for work. This puts the life back into Bhodra who feels for the first time that this world needs her and there is some purpose in living. Partho and Bhodra come close to each other, though with Bhodra being a widow there is an invisible wall between them. Deboki at this time has left her husband's house with her little son, unable to bear the abuse. Her husband comes to her village and when Deboki is not at home he picks up the child and takes him away. Deboki is not prepared to go back and she leaves home to go to Calcutta to a relation's house and find work. These relations make her work in the house like a servant and do not help her to find work. One night when the wife is in the hospital for childbirth, the uncle tries to molest Deboki and Deboki has to leave. As she is about to throw herself in front of a train an old woman saves her and takes her home. Deboki recuperates there and manages to find a job in the Tuberculosis Hospital with the help of a fellow villager Meghi. Meghi is a widow, a brahmin's daughter who had fallen in love with a Muslim man Ali. Partho helps the couple to get to the city and get married. Ali gets a job as a compositor in a press and Meghi finds work as a nurse in this hospital. Deboki also meets Kunal, a press photographer who is a visitor at the hospital as his sister is ill and dying. A relationship of support and affection develop between the two. Sulokkhon is a communist who marries Ishani Debi's niece Lota and takes her to the same house where Deboki lived with her in-laws. Deboki's husband Rajen is a nephew of the family. Lota encounters the oppression in the house and village that had driven Deboki to leave the house and another woman to commit suicide. While Sulokkhon engages with the world outside, Lota engages with the world of the village and tries to improve the quality of life of the village woman. As Partho is away working with the Hajongs, a tribal people, Bhodra moves away from the city with her father-in-law with the war looming. In the little town Bhodra works with other young men and women in the milk canteens and distributing medicine to the ill and needy, linking her solitary life to the people and their trials. When Partho visits them suddenly, Bhodra is taken aback. This visit dispels her belief that Partho was in love with Deboki, and Partho and Bhodra come together to acknowledge their affection for each other and their relationship. Partho goes away to work among the tribal sharecroppers struggling to get the landowners to give them a greater share of the harvest

and Bhodra comes back to Calcutta to work in a press. Then in a fight with the private army of the landlord and military forces, Partho is killed. Bhodra leaves the city to go to the area where Partho had worked and takes up his work after him.

Meghna Podma was written in two parts and published in 1964 and 1965. It follows primarily the life of a little girl Bonya as she comes to her father Indrokumar's village in rural undivided Bengal nestled amidst the rivers Meghna and Podma, with her mother Torulota and three brothers Kripan, Kishan and Tuphan. Indrokumar takes up a job in the village school as a teacher of English and indulges in his passion for drama. Torulota, who was the daughter of a wealthy man, is very disappointed at Indrokumar's decision to come to the village and her frustration is vented on the girl Bonya. Bonya learns quite early that her mother reserves all her affection only for her sons. She is a dreamy girl who finds her source of living in the wonder and colour of the world without. She goes to the potters' quarter to see them create all sorts of beautiful images and colour them. She has her first lessons in painting from them. Her mother is not bothered about her formal education, as she will get married sooner rather than later. However Bonya continues to learn and paint. There is an orphan girl living in the house called Uma, who grows up to be a beautiful and graceful woman. She also is a close friend of Kripan and saves him from the wrath of his father when he indulges in revolutionary activities. Uma is soon married off as the wealthy landowning family of the village, the Choudhurys choose her as a bride for their son Obhijit. Kripan goes to Dhaka for his college education and gets involved in revolutionary activities and is arrested. It comes as a tremendous shock to his parents. Bonya meanwhile meets Meghjit, Obhijit's cousin, an artist who has come back to the village after receiving training abroad. Meghjit recognises Bonya's talent and offers to instruct her. Bonya falls in love with Meghjit but is rudely awakened when Meghjit returns from Dhaka with his bride Uttora. Hurt and bewildered Bonya leaves the village to go to the city to study further.

In the second part Bonya meets a girl Bonojyotsna who is a poet. They become friends and agree to share a room that they rent. Bonya moves out of

her aunt's house to live on her own for the first time. Her relationship with Bonojyotsna is very stimulating and she travels with Bonojyotsna to meet her mother, Joshodhora Debi, who is a respected nationalist. There she meets with two men who become important in her life: Bonjyotsna's cousin Omlan and Jyotirmoy. She is outraged by Omlan's attempt to kiss her and furiously rejects all his claims of affection. When she goes back to the city her relationship with Jyotirmoy, an artist, develops and he becomes a pivotal figure in her life. She gradually comes to know that Jyotirmoy has a young son and his wife is insane. She realises that any relationship with him is not possible but she finds herself continually drawn towards him. Jyotirmoy is affectionate but also keeps a distance from her. Bonya lives on her own at this point desperately trying to survive as an artist. Meanwhile Kripan has married a girl chosen by his mother and his life changes. To satisfy his strikingly beautiful wife he becomes a cog in the wheel of capitalism, in his urge to buy everything that money can buy so that his wife Irani is happy. Torulota is very proud of her son but then realises that she has no place in her son's house. Just before partition Indrokumar dies and Torulota comes to the city. As Kripan's family comes apart and Irani leaves him, Torulota is left to run a family with her sons and also her grandchildren from Kripan. She requests Bonya to come and live with them and to take up a clerk's job at a city office to feed and clothe this family. Bonya feels acutely that someone is wiping clean every dream that she had but she responds to her mother's request and takes up the soul-deadening job. She, the same girl who her mother had hated, takes up the duty of ensuring the well being of the family. At this time there is again a chance meeting with Omlan on her way back from work. It is a changed Omlan but one who is still in love with her. He asks to accompany her on her journey and they go to the opening of a new colony for displaced, homeless people.

Sulekha Sanyal was born in 1928 in a village in what is now Bangladesh, into a decaying feudal family, and died of leukaemia at the age of 34. Being born in a conservative landowning family she ought to have followed the traditional trajectory of a woman's life of early marriage and motherhood. Her sister Sujata Chattopadhyay in an introduction to a collection of Sulekha Sanyal's

short stories says that it was probably an aunt who brought Sulekha up who inspired her to be a resistant and rebellious soul. She defied the family to appear for the matriculation exam by sitting separately in the office of her uncle, who was the headmaster of the village high school. Despite her grandfather's fierce disapproval, Sulekha left the village to pursue her higher education in Faridpur and then Calcutta. While in the village she had been introduced to the revolutionary movement for the country's freedom and later, while in Calcutta, she came into contact with the Communist movement. She identified completely with Marxism and gave up her studies to join the Communists. She was imprisoned for a year and appeared for the BA examination from the prison itself. She married a fellow communist in 1948 but this marriage was not happy. She worked as a teacher for some time on a nominal salary and the poverty and the trauma of her personal life obstructed her creativity. Yet she wrote short stories and *Nobankur* was published around the time that she got divorced. She was then diagnosed with leukaemia. At this time she also found love anew and was once again disillusioned. She went for her treatment to Moscow for a year and then came back to pursue further education, teaching and writing diaries and her second and final novel, which was published posthumously. Her sister describes Sulekha as solitary, fearless and a rebel. Sulekha's work was certainly considered to be too radical for the times and was largely ignored by readers and publishers till the late 1980s. Her writings express an acute consciousness of the political strife in the life of the nation as of the political manoeuvrings in the family and society that is instrumental in oppressing Bengali middle class women. Her female characters find themselves continuously engaged in a struggle for self-expression and dignity.

Nobankur (The Seedling) was published in 1956, shortly before Sanyal was diagnosed with leukaemia. *Nobankur* is the story of a feisty girl Chhobi as she grows up in a decaying feudal family in rural Bengal. The family prides itself on its status, which is conserved by silencing the women and keeping them at home beyond the gaze of the outside world. Chhobi's life takes a slightly different turn, as her mother Momota is an educated woman who was brought up in the city. Though she was forced to give up her music in this family where

it was thought that only women of ill repute sang, she managed to ensure that Chhobi was sent to the basic village school, the *pathshala*. Momota requests the teacher to teach everything he knows to her little girl as she will not be so fortunate as to go to high school as the boys of the family. Then by a happy chance Chhobi's aunt who lives in the town comes to visit the family on the occasion of the wedding of another aunt. Sukumari is childless and wants to take Chhobi with her and bring her up as her daughter. She knows that Momota is very keen on Chhobi's education and convinces Momota that Chhobi will be educated as long as she wanted to learn. Momota loves her daughter dearly and though it breaks her heart to be parted from her daughter she agrees to Sukumari's proposal for the sake of Chhobi's future. For Chhobi this trip to the town exposes her to a different world of people from various communities and classes. Her preliminary contact with the nationalist struggle through a strike creates an awareness of social and political issues that she had been too young to understand earlier. Particularly important for Chhobi is the contact with Sudha, a teacher in the school that Chhobi attends who inculcates in Chhobi an awareness of the subjugation of the nation. The war forces everyone to flee the town and Chhobi comes back to the village and with the help of her uncle she prepares for the matriculation exam. At this time she also sees anew the plight of the women in the village and becomes involved in the famine relief activities. Her grandfather is outraged at her behaviour but she ignores his disapproval fearlessly. He is shocked and shortly afterwards he dies. Chhobi in the meanwhile falls in love with Tomal, a boy who comes to the village from the city to help in the famine relief. She refuses to get married according to her father's wishes. Her cousin Shephu is married instead to the groom who had been selected for her. After Chhobi passes the matriculation examination, Momota arranges for her to go to a college in the city to study further. Her grandmother, who had always discriminated between her grandsons and daughters, hands over the jewellery that had been kept for her wedding so that Chhobi can use it to fund her studies. Neither Momota nor Chhobi know what will be her future but Chhobi knows she must go on.

Note on the translations:

Two novels that have been analysed here have been read in translation, as when I started my thesis, the original Bangla edition was difficult to find in the bookshops. I read the original *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* by Jyotirmoyee Devi in a women's studies library, in a collection of her works that were published some years ago by a Calcutta publishing company. When I sought to get a copy of the book I came across the third impression of the English translation by a feminist publishing house, Stree that has since published other translations of books by Bengali women writers. With Indian academia expressing an interest in translation studies and the growing popularity of women's studies, many books by women authors are now available in translations but not in the original language because they were not reprinted. Similarly in the case of Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur*, I came across a translation but not the original Bangla text. Enakshi Chatterjee has translated the Author's Note and text in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* read as *The River Churning: A Partition Novel.* Sulekha Sanyal's *Nobankur* has been translated by Gouranga Chattopadhyay as *The Seedling's Tale.* Both the translators have managed to convey the spirit of the text and the tonality of the language used by the authors without losing in any fluidity in the translation. Hence the narrative section and the dialogues tie quite closely with the Bangla original without becoming awkward. Translations of other texts used in the thesis are mine.